Five Plots:
The Relationship Between Plot and Genre in Short Fiction

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Bolton for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

February 2018
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following editors and publishers for accepting the short fiction that is contained within this thesis and its appendices: Janet Carden at Crimson Streets, for accepting ‘The Pen’ (2017); Madris de Pasture at New Concepts Publishing, for accepting ‘Pen Friends’ (2016); Rachel Kramer-Bussel at Cleis Press, for accepting ‘Victoria’s Hand’ (2007); Maxim Jakubowski and Constable and Robinson Ltd, for accepting ‘Quid Pro Quo’ (2015); Joseph P. O’Brien, Flapperhouse Magazine, for accepting ‘Buried Treasure’ (2015); Randy Hulshizer at Empyreome, for accepting ‘Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People’ (2017); Lily Harlem and K. D. Grace with The Brit-Babes for cajoling me to write ‘Open Mike’ (2016); and F. Leonora Solomon at Riverdale Publishing, for accepting ‘Orgasm-Girl’ (2018). Thanks also go to my PhD supervisors, Professor David Rudd and Dr. Simon Holloway, who have managed to be encouraging and challenging in their relentless efforts to ensure that my ideas were carefully thought through, articulated and presented. The words ‘I could not have done this without you’ don’t convey the enormous debt I owe you both. I want to thank peers within the writing community, and my colleagues and students at Blackpool and the Fylde college, who have helped me to shape my ideas through discussion and challenge and practical application. Lastly, I would like to thank my ever-patient wife, Tracy, for her love, support and understanding.
Abstract

This thesis explores the notion that, in short fiction, plot is a component part of genre. Using original fiction, and with reference to classic and contemporary examples from a broad range of short stories, the thesis investigates this relationship through an examination of the semantic and syntactic features found in a variety of genres. The thesis begins with an examination of horror, romance and erotic fiction, three of the five supergenres examined and the genres that are perceived to have the strongest focus on character, and on characters’ interrelationships. The thesis then moves on to consider plot-focused supergenres, such as the mystery and the adventure, arguing that the whodunit, fantasy and science fiction are basic level genres, subordinate to either the mystery or adventure supergenres. The thesis concludes by discussing further original, and somewhat experimental fiction that has come from this approach to the notion of plot being a component part of genre. It is hoped that this study will be of value to writers on both theoretical and practical levels. From a theoretical perspective, this material demonstrates one writer’s approach to analysing genre fiction, which should prove a useful model for other writers to use or appropriate. From a practical point of view, the contents of this thesis should prove an aid to writers, who will be able to see what it is that makes their fiction successful, or not, from a genre perspective.
Introduction

This thesis explores the notion that, in short fiction, plot is a component part of genre. For the purposes of this Introduction, it is helpful to acknowledge that the term *plot* describes the arrangement of events in a narrative – the action, the reaction and the consequences – whilst the term *genre* refers to the category with which a narrative is usually associated, such as adventure, erotica, horror, mystery or romance. Much has been written about the discrete subjects of plot and genre, more of which will be discussed in depth during the literature review and methodology sections of this thesis. However, very little has been written about the way these two aspects of fiction can, and do, affect each other. For example, the fact that stories ascribed to the horror genre are usually constructed with a horror plot; that is, with a pattern of action, reaction and consequences similar in content to the action, reaction and consequences of other stories from the horror genre. The same can be said for stories classified as belonging to the mystery genre, which are most commonly constructed with a mystery plot, and for stories related to the other supergenres, that is, those hypernymic genres to which all other genres are hyponymically subordinate, all of which will be discussed in greater depth in the body of this thesis.

This thesis came about following the observation that major theorists, such as Aristotle, Gustav Freytag and Tzvetan Todorov, have little to say about plot as a component of genre. Few theorists seem to have given much weight to the relationship between the distinctive syntactic features of plot in genre fiction, which are as telling of a genre as the semantic use of a sword-wielding hero’s
vanquishing of a fire-breathing dragon or a hard-boiled detective’s shared shot of bourbon with his *femme fatale* client. So, after noting how many other commentators home in on these, arguably more superficial semantic features as being the key defining feature of a genre, this thesis takes a different stance. It will be argued that the syntactic structure of the plot is a stronger indicator of genre than semantic conventions. This innovative approach will be demonstrated using some of my own creative work, with a view to showing how such an approach can advantage other fiction writers.

To explain the syntactic relationship between plot and genre in a little more detail, it is worth considering the example of the typical romance story. Traditionally, the heteronormative description of a romance would be that it is a ‘Boy Meets Girl’ story. However, as writer and lecturer Ronald B. Tobias notes:

> Since we know conflict is fundamental to fiction, we also know ‘Boy Meets Girl’ isn’t enough. It must be ‘Boy Meets Girl, But…’ The story hinges on the ‘But…’ These are the obstacles to love that keep the lovers from consummating their affair. (Tobias, 1993: 168)

Although this is a simplification, this notion of ‘Boy Meets Girl, But…’ is an accurate description of many familiar stories that are representative of the romance genre. Heathcliff meets Cathy but circumstances, social pressures and, eventually, death, present obstacles to their mutual happiness. Tristan meets Isolde but she is betrothed to King Mark of Cornwall. Lancelot meets Guinevere, but her marriage to King Arthur presents a substantial obstacle to them being together. Orpheus meets Eurydice but her death and subsequent incarceration in the underworld present formidable obstacles to the success of their relationship. Odysseus meets Penelope, Paola meets Francesca, Edward Rochester meets
Jane Eyre, Mr Darcy meets Elizabeth Bennet and Harry meets Sally.¹ Each of these meetings, which begins with a promise of satisfactory and fulfilling romance, is soon obstructed by obstacles, events or other complications. Given that romance narratives can cover such a broad range of locations, historical periods and character occupations, as well as many other diverse factors, it is only this syntactic aspect of the relationship in the story – the narrative that shows two characters meeting and then striving to overcome all those obstacles that threaten to impede their successful resolution – that defines a narrative as belonging to the romance genre. It goes without saying that characters in other genres also have to overcome obstacles to resolve inevitable narrative conflict. However, it is only in the romance plot that characters have to overcome those specific obstacles that impede their blossoming relationship. This connection between plot and genre will be more fully explored in the body of this thesis, specifically looking at examples from disparate genres that include adventure stories, erotic stories, horror stories, mystery stories and romance stories, as well as considering subordinate or subgenres such as the whodunit, and basic level genres such as fantasy and science fiction. The motivation for undertaking this thesis grew out of my work as an author and creative writing lecturer. During my career as a writer and a reader I have repeatedly been struck by perceived similarities found in the plots of various texts. This notion was never as specific as folklorist Vladimir Propp’s exhaustive categorisation of narratemes in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), identifying each component element from a range of folktales. Nor were my ideas so broad as to follow mythologist Joseph Campbell’s

¹ It is appreciated that some of these narratives are novels, films and texts that could not feasibly be described as short fiction, which will be the focus of this thesis. However, these texts are discussed here because they illustrate a very similar pattern within the way they are typically presented to readers and audiences.
identification of a monomyth in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004), where a one-size-fits-all story template is argued to apply to every piece of fiction, in most places fitting somewhat loosely. To my mind, this latter idea can be likened to the writer David Long’s similarly oversimplified notion that ‘there are only two plots: a stranger rides into town, and a man goes on a journey’ (1986: 21-22), which could itself be reduced to a mono-plot, in that a stranger riding into town and a character going on a journey can be perceived as the same story, dependent on whether the narrative perspective is from a character in the town affected by the visiting stranger, or the perspective is of a narrating character exploring a new town. This juxtaposition of similar perspectives is neatly illustrated in the contrast between Dorothy’s story in the film of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), where she goes on a trip from Kansas to explore the new world of Oz, and the same character’s role in the musical *Wicked* (2003), where Dorothy is presented (albeit in a minor role) as the stranger riding into town, viewed from the perspective of Oz’s existing inhabitants.

Whilst it is acknowledged that character is an essential aspect of genre fiction, rather than discussing the (dis)similarities of narratives as perceived from a character perspective, it seems to me more revealing to illustrate my point using the (dis)similarities of narrative from a plot perspective. As the author Henry James observed: ‘What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?’ (2015: 270). If we take James’s point to

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2 Long attributes the original source of this comment to John Gardner, whilst other authors have attributed the remark to writers as varied as Deepak Chopra, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ernest Hemingway and Leo Tolstoy. In *The Art of Fiction*, Gardner does provide a writing exercise where the subject could be ‘either a trip, or the arrival of a stranger’ (1991: 103). However, there is no further evidence to suggest that Gardner offered this as a simplification of plot.
be that character and those incidents that shape the plot are inextricably linked, then James seems to be sanctioning an approach that, more parsimoniously, simply considers plot. I looked in vain for other critical writings that explored this link between plot and genre, but most seemed to take the opposite view, generating increasing numbers of plot types; such as Georges Polti, author of *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations* (1916/2007), and the aforementioned Tobias, author of *Twenty Master Plots and How to Build Them* (1999), and Christopher Booker, author of *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2004). Instead of this quantitative, taxonomic approach, I was interested in a more qualitative one that explored the underlying grammar of genres. Rather than simply counting the number of plots I perceived to be in existence, I wanted to explore the idea that, on a syntactic level, there is a relationship between the plot of a narrative and the genre in which that narrative is usually categorised.

This unexplored insight interests me beyond the academic value of identifying and examining the relationship between plot and genre, as it seems to crystallise how and why certain plot devices work for some genres, whereas the same plot devices seem to fail for other genres. It is the sort of insight that I would have welcomed as a young writer, so, as a creative writing lecturer, because I believe that a better developed understanding of plot and genre could prove invaluable for many aspiring writers, I consider this the sort of advice I want to pass on to my students. My research is not completely altruistic, however, for as a commercial author of genre fiction, I am always keen to find ways to expedite the writing

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3 Victoria Lyn Schmidt, considering masculine and feminine approaches to narratives, expands this number to fifty-five dramatic situations (2005: 99-102).
process and I anticipate that utilising this relationship between the structure of plot and the marketability of genre could make it easier for me to construct fiction of a merchantable quality for a broad range of audiences.

Consequently, my intention in this project has been to produce an original body of creative work as a springboard to explore the idea that particular genres of fiction can be perceived as being dependent on specific plots. To that end, as suggested before, I am arguing that any piece of, say, short adventure fiction is driven by the same single adventure plot that is common to all short adventure fiction. The same is true for short erotic fiction, short horror fiction, short mystery fiction and, as mentioned above, short romantic fiction. I will argue that each of these five genres - the five supergenres as I am calling them - is driven by its own distinct plot.

To explore this hypothesis, my investigation involves a five-step process:

1) To write a series of short stories that I perceive to be representative of specific genres.

2) To compare and consider each story against classic and contemporary examples of similar genre fiction.

3) To identify component aspects of literary genres.

4) To use the series of short fiction, as well as the classic and contemporary comparisons, to identify and describe the correlations between plots and genres.
5) To test the results of this investigation against the rigours of the contemporary marketplace as they apply to my current professional practice.4

As previously mentioned, this thesis includes representative examples of short fiction from the five identified supergenres (adventure, erotica, horror, mystery and romance), as well as fiction from the basic level genres of the whodunit, the fantasy and the science-fiction story. Each of these short fictions is followed by an explanation of how I perceive plot to be a component part of genre. Each explanation is illustrated with reference to a range of appropriate examples from existing fiction as well as from the eight original stories presented in this thesis. The thesis concludes with a discussion of how this approach to mapping plot as a component part of genre has been used to explore a range of current writing projects.

As mentioned above, rather than presenting the fiction separately from the discussion on theory, the fiction is presented alongside the relevant theoretical material. My rationale for this unconventional presentation echoes the poet and teacher Nessa O’Mahony’s observations where she said:

I believe that the unique quality of the PhD in Creative Writing is that it gives writers the opportunity not only to write, but also to find ways of elucidating the process of writing by referring not only to their own work but to the work of other writers who have gone before them. (O’Mahony, 2008: 46)

4 It is acknowledged that publication and marketability only share a peripheral relationship with creative writing. However, on a personal level, I perceive publication to be the litmus test of a piece’s success and, consequently, this fifth step is important to satisfy my personal expectations of fiction. This is not to suggest that the fiction has been written with the sole intention of publication: each piece has been written to exemplify a particular genre and, in all but two cases, ‘Victoria’s Hand’ and ‘Quid Pro Quo’, the fiction has been produced without a specific audience or publication in mind.
It is because of that desire for ‘elucidating the process’, using my own work and referring to the works of other writers, and because the theoretical material will include a reflection on the genre-specific components that are exemplified in the fiction, that the materials are presented in this way. To this end, with the fiction being presented immediately prior to the theoretical material, the discussion can be more keenly focussed on the relevant elements of individual genres. The first three supergenres, horror, romance and erotica, are represented by single stories. These are followed by the mystery supergenre, and the mystery story’s subordinate genre of the whodunit. The thesis then moves on to look at the supergenre of the adventure story and the way adventure stories (and, by implication, any other category of supergenre) can be subordinated to include basic level genres such as fantasy and science-fiction. These basic level genres are used in this thesis to illustrate the difference between the syntactic and semantic aspects of genre and, again, these details will be explored further in the literature review and methodology. The ordering of the genres is arbitrary and there is no intention to suggest any single genre takes precedence over any other.

As stated at the start of this Introduction, much has been written about plot and genre. However, the major theorists in this field have given very little credence to the idea that plot is an essential component of genre. This thesis aims to illustrate a relationship between plot and genre through an examination of my original fiction, as well as through comparative references to classic and contemporary works from various genres, all of which is supported by discussion through relevant authors and authorities.
Chapter 1: Literature Review

An Interpretation of Genre

As mentioned in the Introduction, the purpose of this project is to discuss the notion that plot is a component part of genre. However, prior to exploring this idea, it is important to establish a glossary of terms, beginning with the word genre. Professor Katie Wales notes that the term comes from Latin, via French, and originally meant a ‘kind’ or ‘class’; she continues:

> Since classical times it has been customary to think of literature as consisting of different kinds of works, and one function of a poetics, from Aristotle onwards, has been to try and classify them, from theoretical, structural and also historical perspectives. (Wales, 2001: 176-177)

In light of this definition, it would seem prudent to consider genre from each of these three perspectives: historical, theoretical and structural, beginning with the historical.

Genre has been the subject of much inconclusive debate since Plato first posited a distinction between the mimetic forms of tragedy and comedy. Aristotle’s Poetics identified further differentiated forms of generic imitation, citing the epic, the tragedy, the comedy, as well as the dithyrambic and lyric forms of poetry. Historians Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan continue the narrative at this point, noting that,

> [a]fter Aristotle, it was Alexandrian scholarship that undertook the first comprehensive stock-taking of Greek poetry and began the process of grouping, grading, and classifying genres. Lists or ‘canons’ of the best writers in each kind were made, which led to a sharper awareness of genre. (Preminger & Brogan, 1993: 457)
It will be noted that, in the days of the Alexandrian Library, according to Galen of Pergamon, books from the ships were initially listed in the library’s catalogue, somewhat unhelpfully, as books ‘from the ships’ (Barnes, 2000: 65). Admittedly, categorisation has progressed since those days. However, as Robert Allen notes:

For most of its 2,000 years, genre study has been primarily nominological and typological in function. That is to say, it has taken as its principal task the division of the world of literature into types and the naming of those types - much as the botanist divides the realm of flora into varieties of plants. (Allen, 1989: 44)

Nevertheless, whilst this taxonomic approach seems a sensible way of addressing genre classification, the idea does not appear to be without problems. As botanist V. V. Sivarajan notes, ‘many of our ideas on primitive characters and primitive taxa are still indefinite on account of the lack of conclusive evidence’ (1991: 33). Sivarajan goes on to add,

[n]or do we have universally applicable methods of discovering them. Several papers on the use of various criteria in the determination of the evolutionary polarity of character-states have recently appeared [...] but the issue seems to be bogged down in unending disputes. (Sivarajan, 1991: 33)

These shortcomings in taxonomic categorisation are echoed by the writer Bill Bryson who observes, whilst discussing Linnaeus’s *Systema Natura*, ‘Taxonomy is described sometimes as a science and sometimes as an art, but really it’s a battleground. Even today there is more disorder in the system than most people realise’ (2004: 437). Therefore, whilst it is acknowledged that there is no strict Linnaean schema identifying the binominal nomenclature of species and genus within a literary genre, it is also worth observing that any categorisation of genre attempting to use a taxonomy similar to those systems employed for describing
flora and fauna, is a system built on flawed foundations. Given this perceived disorder in taxonomies based on a Linnaean structure, which remains one of the more enduring models of categorisation, a more appropriate method for approaching literary genres could be based on Eleanor Rosch’s prototype theory, as defined in her *Principles of Categorisation*. Rosch explains that ‘the task of category systems is to provide maximum information with the least cognitive effort’ (1978: 28). Rosch also notes that ‘the perceived world is not an unstructured total set of equiprobable co-occurring attributes. Rather, the material objects of the world are perceived to possess […] high correlational structure’ (1978: 29).

Rosch’s approach depends on the identification of prototypes and the cataloguing of related items as either subordinate or superordinate, depending on their correlational structure with the item being defined. Rosch illustrates the point with the following table:

**Examples of Taxonomies Used in Basic Object Research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate</th>
<th>Basic Level</th>
<th>Subordinate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>Kitchen chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Living-room chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Table</td>
<td>Kitchen table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dining-room table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lamp</td>
<td>Floor lamp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk lamp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Rosch, 1978: 35)

Following the layout of this example showing the high correlation between items of furniture, one strand of a taxonomy for literary genres might look like the following example:

\[\text{It will be noted that this categorisation is only being applied to short narrative fiction. Genre becomes a much more complex beast in the content of a novel, where multiple subplots can be}\]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate</th>
<th>Basic Level</th>
<th>Subordinate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Historical romance</td>
<td>Medieval romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regency romance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contemporary romance</td>
<td>Medical romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Romantic suspense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Erotic romance</td>
<td>Vanilla erotic romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BDSM erotic romance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This method of categorisation serves as a working model because it shows a correlation between all these genres based on their romantic content, whilst it also makes explicit the categorical difference between a Regency romance and a BDSM erotic romance. It will be noted that this method of categorisation shows an overlap between romantic fiction and erotic fiction, and it is acknowledged that there will be overlap between genres, but this is a detail which will be addressed later when discussing genre from structural perspectives.

From a theoretical perspective it seems fair to say that some critics have railed against the concept of genre altogether. Thus, when theorist Richard Coe discussed ‘the tyranny of the genre’ he argued that genres are ‘generative, heuristic and constraining’ (1998: 126). Similarly, whilst Jacques Derrida describes the restrictions of genre as ‘madness’, he does concede,

> [o]n the one hand it commits one to nothing. Neither reader nor critic nor author are bound to believe that the text preceded by this designation conforms readily to the strict, normal, normed or normative definition of the genre, to the law of the genre or of the mode. (1980: 214)

included to support a main narrative. Similarly, although these models can be applied to some examples of narrative poetry, for the sake of clarity and focus, poems are not being considered in this thesis. Admittedly, novels and films have been mentioned in the Introduction, and will be mentioned throughout the body of this thesis, but this is only where the familiarity of the relevant plot conventions in these well-known fictions will make it easier for the reader to follow the discussion and the applications of the proposed templates.

6 Bondage and Discipline. Sadism and Masochism.
It is significant to note that author John Frow observes that ‘one of the inherent problems with working with genre theory is of course the lack of an agreed and coherent terminology’ (2014: 65). This problem, in short fiction, is exacerbated by an absence of definitions for existing genres. Even though we know whether we have read a romance or a fantasy or a whodunit, the genres are defined by cultural perceptions and not by more intrinsic aspects of the fiction. Professor Robert Stam expanded on this point when he suggested that genre analysis is beset by several problems (2000: 128-129). Although Stam’s discussion is focused on film genres, some of the issues he raises are also pertinent to literary genres. Stam mentions four considerations to take into account when approaching genre: first that some labels are too broad or extended to be of practicable value (e.g. comedy, romance, drama etc.), or too specific to be of qualitative use (e.g. YA science-fiction dystopia, locked room murder mystery, dinosaur erotica etc.); second that some labels can be normative, and therefore prescriptive of content (suggesting, for example, that every western should include a gunfight, or that every American detective story should contain a car chase); thirdly, Stam argues that genres are rarely monolithic, in that few stories can be placed within a single genre as generic conventions overlap, an idea that is reflected below in literary critic Norman Holland’s notion of subjectivity; finally, Stam discusses the idea that genres can be submerged, illustrated by his argument that the movie *Taxi Driver* is ‘really’ a western.7

7 *Taxi Driver* can be interpreted as a western if one thinks of Travis Bickle as a Shane character, attempting to redress New York’s wrongs with the weaponry of frontier justice.
To some extent these issues with genre analysis can be viewed as a reminder that all interpretations of fictions are ultimately subjective and there are few texts that are universally considered as belonging to a single genre. For example, a piece such as Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Haunted House’ (2003: 116-118), a story which shows the ghosts of an elderly couple searching for an elusive something in the house they haunt, could be interpreted as either a horror story or a romance, depending on the vagaries of the reader. Thus literary critic Sophia Achillea-Hughes suggests that ‘this text works to unravel the reader’s expectations of a conventional ghost story’, leading her to conclude that ‘A Haunted House is neither a conventional ghost story, nor a conventional love story’ (2012-2013: 46-49). Similarly, in O. Henry’s ‘The Gift of the Magi’ (2016: 7-10), where a young couple make separate, and somewhat ironic, sacrifices to afford a Christmas gift for each other, the story could be interpreted as representative of either the romance genre, because the characters are selflessly giving to each other, or the mystery genre, as the reader waits to find out why Jim is late and what he will think of his wife’s gift. But, in each of these stories there is no discernible criterion for assigning the work to a specific genre: in the final analysis there is only the reader’s interpretation. Norman Holland, arguing that ‘interpretation is a function of identity’, suggests that ‘all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally replicate ourselves’ (1980: 123-4). If we accept Holland’s position then it is conceded that individual readers, replicating themselves with each literary work, have the propensity to categorise a single story in a variety of disparate genres dependent on their personal interpretation of a story’s themes. Of course, it will always be possible for some to read, say, Macbeth, as a murder mystery, as in James Thurber’s celebrated short story ‘The Macbeth Murder Mystery’ (1943). However, whilst such
personal interpretations will always be valid for the individual, the approach outlined in this thesis offers a structured method for describing and identifying a narrative’s semantic content and syntactic structuring as these elements relate to genre. Not only does this approach offer a practical way for writers to make sense of generic conventions, but it should also have implications for creative writing studies in general, a topic that will be discussed at more length in Chapter 10: Applications of the Template.

Having touched on historical and theoretical perspectives on genre, let me now move on to what I consider the most important approach to genre for this thesis: the structural perspective. To that end, it is worth reiterating Daniel Chandler’s assertion from his Introduction to Genre Theory:

> How we define a genre depends on our purposes; the adequacy of our definition in terms of social science at least must surely be related to the light that the exploration sheds on the phenomenon. For instance, if we are studying the way in which genre frames the reader's interpretation of a text then we would do well to focus on how readers identify genres rather than on theoretical distinctions. (Chandler, 1997: 3)

The purpose of identifying genres, as stated in the Introduction, is to demonstrate the correlation between plots in short narrative fiction and the literary genres to which those plots are characteristically ascribed. To that end, it is important to note that I am setting aside two other usages of the word ‘genre’: first, to classify literary works according to their form, such as when distinguishing poetry from prose; second, to identify the type of medium employed, whether oral, written, staged or digital. In this thesis, the term ‘genre’ is used specifically to discuss identifiable categories of fiction that are conventionally recognised by their common tropes.
However, as I have already explained, my aim is to argue that, rather than taking these semantic aspects as definitive identifiers of genre, genres are more reliably categorised syntactically, according to the specific structure of the plot that each genre deploys.

This is a notion that echoes the ideas of structuralist literary critic Tzvetan Todorov, who observes that genres ‘function as “horizons of expectation” for readers and “models of writing” for authors’ (1990: 19). These ‘horizons of expectation’ are specific to individual readers, depending on their own psychological profiles and histories of reading, and therefore each reader will interpret texts in specific ways. Of course, such a view opens the door again for different generic interpretations of a story, but it is now based on more structuralist premises; namely that, even if we accept that individual readers are sometimes quirky in their interpretations, those interpretations will still be founded on the recognition of certain generic patterns in a story – as, for example, in seeing Macbeth as a murder mystery. This, more structuralist approach is still unlikely to challenge readers’ everyday ways of approaching genre, any more than does telling readers that characters like Madame Bovary are merely signifiers, or that the sun does not really circle the earth. However, what it does provide is an alternative way of determining genre that is not simply dependent on content.

Staying with Todorov for a moment longer, it is worth considering his observation that a genre ‘is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties’ (1990: 18). Analysing these discursive properties further, Todorov notes that ‘these properties stem either from the semantic aspect of the text, or from its syntactic aspect’ (1990: 18). To that end, considering the syntactic and semantic aspects as
discrete indicators of genre, it can be shown how some stories are wholly immersed in one genre whilst others sit awkwardly between two or more genres.

Let me provide some examples. A story like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ (1846), which has a theme of the diabolical and shows one man being exposed to supernatural entities, is usually described as belonging only to the horror genre. Conversely, whilst Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ (1948) is also often categorised as a horror story, it is fair to acknowledge that Jackson’s story contains aspects of more than just the horror genre. ‘The Lottery’ narrates the tale of a brutal village ritual and contains elements of both the mystery genre and the horror genre. It is in this overlap that it is possible to show how the more normative semantic approach is less discriminatory than a syntactic one; in the former approach, one can see the semantic similarities of oppressive societies, narrative tension built on a sense of the uncanny, and otherwise unnatural developments whilst, considering the syntactic aspects of both narratives show two stories with very different structures. So, semantically ‘Young Goodman Brown’ falls into the genre of horror story. Characters, on a walk through an unlit forest, discuss devil worship, shape-shifting and ritual sacrifice. There is mention of broomsticks, supernatural cursing and other aspects of the descriptive furniture associated with the archetypes of witchcraft as it is presented in typical horror fiction. However, if, instead of uncanny forests and the supernatural accessories of witchcraft, the details had included space travel, technological advances and alien species, most readers would, in line with a semantic approach, see the story as conforming to the requirements of the science-fiction genre. Similarly, if the semantic details on the journey had included dragons and wizardry, readers would see the story as
belonging to the fantasy genre. This point is being laboured to reinforce the notion that the semantic furnishings of a narrative have a strong influence over the genre to which a story is usually ascribed, regardless of whether that label is applied by the reader, the writer or the publisher.

Of course, some commentators have observed that more is going on beneath these surface trappings, as is evident in Stam’s comment that *Taxi Driver* is really a western. Likewise, Stephen King points out that the film *Alien* (1979), usually regarded as an example of science fiction because of its semantic content of interstellar travel, space ships and alien species, ‘is a horror movie even though it is more firmly grounded in scientific projection than *Star Wars*’ (1981: 31). With the exception of isolated observations like these, it is clear that identification of a film’s genre through the semantic content usually takes precedence over identification through the syntactic structure. This focus on the semantic aspects of genre is probably why Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain* (1998), a romance story of forbidden love, is listed on Amazon as a western, simply because the main characters are, semantically, cowboys. There is nothing inherently wrong with this semantic focus. However, any readers expecting a story of gunfights, cattle rustling and pioneering exploration of the wild west, are likely to find the content of *Brokeback Mountain* does not fully meet their expectations. This is why a syntactic approach, focusing on the plot, can prove a more reliable way of determining genre, and avoid the distractions of a story’s surface furniture. These syntactic aspects of genre, those aspects that Todorov describes as ‘the relations of the parts amongst themselves’ (1990: 18), also have the advantage of conforming to a limited number of familiar structures, as will be demonstrated later in this thesis.
Syntactically, then, ‘Young Goodman Brown’ follows a pattern that introduces a main character in conflict with a supernatural entity. The main character then experiences a logical progression of events to resolve that conflict. The story concludes with a partial resolution of the conflict. This narrative sequence, the syntactic aspect of the discursive properties, is the one most commonly associated with the horror genre. This is the same pattern of events that can be seen in the majority of stories that are typically categorised as belonging to the horror genre, such as many of the short works written by Edgar Allan Poe, most of the stories produced by H. P. Lovecraft and a large number of the stories composed by Stephen King. This syntactic structure is one of the patterns that will be discussed later, in much greater depth, when considering the horror genre.

The case is slightly different with a story like Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’. Semantically this story contains an assortment of the characteristic furnishings of the horror genre. The story deals with a sinister, societally-approved ritual of unjust and excessive violence: typical fare for the horror genre. However, at a syntactic level, ‘The Lottery’ is structured in the manner of a mystery story. The reader is initially presented with a puzzle as to the nature of the lottery. In the second part of the story various elements and clues are revealed, all of which allow for the revelation of the story’s disquieting conclusion.\(^8\) Syntactically the mystery plot follows the pattern of presenting the reader with a puzzle which is resolved by the conclusion of the story. Variations on this structure, as will be shown later, can be seen in

\(^8\) Again, the structure of the mystery plot is described more comprehensively later in this material, under Chapter 6: Analysis of the Mystery Genre Its Associated Plot.
stories associated with crime-solving characters such as Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Lord Peter Wimsey, Auguste Dupin, Hercule Poirot, Scooby-Doo and many others. Consequently, although ‘The Lottery’ can be considered as fitting into the horror genre because of its semantic content, in its syntactic structure it conforms to the mystery genre.

The relevance of this distinction will become apparent later, as it will be shown that many basic level genres, such as fantasy and science fiction, are subordinate to the higher-level supergenres and are wholly defined by the semantic content. However, it is sufficient, for the moment, to note that the definition of genre being discussed here includes this distinction between the semantic and syntactic. And, with this syntactic interpretation of genre in mind, it is prudent at this point to consider a working definition of plot.
The Components of Plot

Aristotle defines the proper construction of plot as ‘the first and most important element in tragedy’ (1.7, 23a20). He goes on to describe a plot as something that has a beginning, a middle, and an end:

A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms described. (Aristotle. 1.7, 26a22-34)

It is acknowledged that some writers are more dismissive of plot. Thus, author Kate Grenville glosses simplistically over the subject saying, ‘Getting a string of things happening is the basic raw material of a piece of writing. Put them together and you’ve got a plot’ (1990: 142). Rather flippantly, Stephen King defines plot as ‘the good writer’s last resort and the dullard’s first choice’ (2000: 164). Somewhat tellingly, the notice at the front of Huckleberry Finn warns: ‘persons attempting to find a plot in [the narrative] will be shot’ (Twain, 1885/2010:1). These examples, whilst not representative of all writers, do reflect a large body of opinion that appears to place little value on the academic consideration of plot. Plot appears, particularly in these three examples, to be perceived as something unimportant, something irrelevant, or as a subject that merits little discussion. It is possible that these limited views of plot are so common because plotting is something that writers and storytellers are all expected to do on an innate level. Indeed, author

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9 For the purposes of simplicity, Aristotle’s description of ‘mythos’, as one of the six elements of Athenian tragedy, is being used in this thesis with the popular interpretation of ‘plot’.
and teacher John Yorke argues that plot is a part of our biological heritage when he says:

"Storytelling has a shape. It dominates the way all stories are told and can be traced back not just to the Renaissance, but to the very beginnings of the recorded word. It’s a structure that we absorb avidly whether in art-house or airport form and it’s a shape that may be—though we must be careful—a universal archetype. (2016: n.p.)"

If Yorke is right, it could be conceded that the aforementioned authors are correct in dismissing plot as a topic worthy of discussion because there would seem to be little benefit for writers to explore the construction of universal archetypes, other than out of academic curiosity. However, whilst it is conceded that there is some truth in Yorke’s assertion, not all writers eschew the structures that can be used to describe plot. Jorge Luis Borges, for instance, declares in complete contrast, ‘what I think is most important in a short story is the plot or situation’ (1972: 46). Robert McKee is more specific in indicating what it is that plot contributes; namely, ‘the internally consistent, inter-related pattern of events that move through time to shape and design a story’ (1999: 43). As a final example, author James Scott Bell provides a more market-driven rationale: ‘if you want readers, you must consider plot’ (2004: 8). Each of these authorities mentions a different aspect of the significance of plot, with Borges stressing its value for the short story writer, McKee concentrating on the plot as a structural necessity and Bell focusing on plot’s commercial importance. These represent strong arguments for the relevance of plot as an area for consideration. Each of these arguments is pertinent to the
focus of this thesis, particularly for the satisfactory completion of points four and five from the five-step process described in the Introduction.\textsuperscript{10}

Of course, as observed in the Introduction, none of this discussion of plot takes into account the importance of characters in fiction. As crime writer Lawrence Block rightly explains:

\begin{quote}
[t]he chief reason for almost any reader to go on turning the pages of almost any novel is to find out what happens next. The reason the reader cares what happens next is because of the author's skill at characterisation. When the characters are sufficiently well drawn, and when they've been so constructed as to engage the reader's capacities for sympathy and identification, he wants to see how their lives turn out and is deeply concerned that they turn out well. (Block, 2010: 63, italics in original)
\end{quote}

Given the reader's concern for characters and what happens next in their lives, it is hard to argue against the primary importance of character in fiction. However, Block's point is that readers want to know 'what happens next' to the character, suggesting that the sequence of events, the plot, is of equal importance to readers' investment in the character. Similarly, as writers Randy Ingermanson and Peter Economy tell us, '[a] story consists of characters in conflict' (2010: 25). More will be said about the nature of conflict in Chapter 3: Analysis of the Horror Genre and its Associated Plot, but, for the moment, it should be acknowledged that character conflict affects plot, for, as writer and teacher David Harris Ebenbach more succinctly observes, '[p]lot depends on conflict' (2003: 58). All of these approaches to character and plot are summed up in the creative writing mantra, 'character is

\textsuperscript{10} 4) To use the series of short fiction, as well as the classic and contemporary comparisons, to identify and describe the correlations between plots and genres.

5) To test the results of this investigation against the rigours of the contemporary marketplace as they apply to my current professional practice.
plot, plot is character’,¹¹ which, in this context, reads like a reimagining of Henry James’s remark, mentioned in the Introduction: ‘What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?’ (2015: 270).

Returning to the subject of plot, it will be noted that some writers maintain that ‘story’ and ‘plot’ are synonymous, like Matt Morrison, who hides his discussion of ‘plot’ under the headword ‘story’ in the alphabetical listings of Key Concepts in Creative Writing, arguing that ‘the terms ‘story’ and ‘plot’ are often used interchangeably and it is impossible to give mutually exclusive definitions of each’ (2010: 130). I would maintain that, in this example, Morrison is thinking only of those usages where this is the case and not, as philosopher Karl Popper always advised, seeking counter-examples to refute his hypothesis. As an example, Wales notes the case where ‘one talks about reading a novel for its story’, in which the words story and plot are similar (2001: 367). This is a valid point, but the words cannot always be used so interchangeably. In particular, the word ‘plot’ cannot be used as widely as story; for example, whilst we might reasonably discuss the plot of a story, we are very unlikely to talk about the story of a plot. This suggests that most writers use plot as a hyponym of story, where plot is a subordinate term that refers to a specific aspect of the broader meaning implied by story. Wales pragmatically states that the latter term ‘in ordinary usage refers to a narrative, whether fact or fiction, which is regarded noteworthy of being told’ (2001: 367).

Exploring the notion in more depth, writers David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson

¹¹ This dictum is usually ascribed to F. Scott Fitzgerald although, as Andrew Cowan notes, it is ‘nowhere given a source’ (2013: 99). Cowan goes on to add, ‘Perhaps […] Fitzgerald never really said it. Which doesn’t mean it’s not true’ (2013: 99).
suggest that ‘story and plot overlap in one respect and diverge in others’ (1997: 93). They use the following diagram to illustrate their point:

![Diagram of story and plot](image)

Whilst this diagram derives from film studies, the distinction between the two terms, with plot being the ‘explicitly presented events’ and story being the ‘explicitly presented events and the inferred events’, does seem to reinforce the idea that plot is a subordinate term to story. In many ways, this can be seen to reiterate Umberto Eco’s observation that ‘a text is [not] a crystal-clear structure interpretable in a single way; on the contrary, a text is a lazy machinery which forces its possible readers to do a part of its textual work’ (1981: 36).

In the context of this thesis, that specific aspect, the plot, is designated as comprising the structural component of a story. It is therefore worth examining how other writers have described their own perceptions of this structural aspect. The American writer, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., who actually maps plots on an X-Y axis to graphically demonstrate their similarities, says:
You will see this story over and over again. People love it and it is not copyrighted. The story is 'Man in Hole,' but the story needn't be about a man or a hole. It's somebody gets into trouble, gets out of it again. (Vonnegut Jr., 2006: 23 – 24)

Vonnegut Jr., with his visual representation of the shape of plots, is clearly discussing the structural shape of story. It is of particular note that Vonnegut Jr. draws our attention to the patterning of the story in order to see similarities between purportedly different plots. Thus, when Vonnegut Jr. draws the shape of his ‘Boy Meets Girl’ plot, we can see it is not massively dissimilar to the shape of his interpretation of a ‘Cinderella’ plot. We might even note that the first peak of both graphs indicates the point in the narrative where each central character initially meets the character with whom he or she becomes romantically paired. Similarly, the second peak describes the ultimate happiness of the characters at the conclusion of the story.
Admittedly there are variations in the starting points of these stories, and obvious differences in the fluidity of the lines, but these illustrative descriptions do show the same plotted trends of climbing, falling and subsequent climbing to a satisfactory conclusion.

The shape and structure of plot have also been considered by the Russian literary theorist, Viktor Shklovsky, who discusses the terms plot and motif in his *Theory of Prose*. Shklovsky defines plot as ‘a theme, into which a variety of motif-situations have been woven’ (1990: 16). The latter he defines as ‘the simplest narrative unit corresponding imagistically to the diverse needs of a primitive mind and to the diverse needs of ordinary perception’ (1929: 16, italics in original). In some ways this is reminiscent of Propp’s empirical observations in *Morphology of the Folktale*. As mentioned in the Introduction, Propp identified thirty-one specific functions, or narratemes, in Russian folk tales, such as ‘one of the members of a family absents himself from home’, or ‘an interdiction is addressed to the hero’ (1928: 26) then ‘violated’ (1928: 27). Explaining the sequential nature of these narratemes, Propp says:
As for groupings, it is necessary to say first of all that by no means do all tales give evidence of all functions. But this in no way changes the law of sequence. The absence of certain functions does not change the order of the rest. (Propp, 1928: 22)

That is to say, whilst not all of Propp’s narratemes occur in every story, those that do always occur in the same specific order. Parallels to this approach to plot can even be drawn from the way Claude Lévi-Strauss, the structural anthropologist, identified mythemes as ‘the gross constituent units’ of myths. As Lévi-Strauss noted: ‘The true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce meaning’ (1963: 211, italics in original).

This specificity of organisation, this focus on the bundle of causal relationships that constitutes the prescribed order of the occurrence of narrative events, suggests a parallel with novelist E. M. Forster’s arguments for the distinction between story and plot:

We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, then the queen died of grief’ is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: ‘The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king’. (Forster, 1979: 87)

All of this supports the idea that there is a coterminous understanding of the term plot, as used by Vonnegut, Shklovsky, Propp, Lévi-Strauss and Forster, amongst others. So, whether the component parts are cited in terms of a beginning, middle and end, or as motifs, narratemes, mythemes, or a narrative with the emphasis on causality, the word plot most succinctly functions as an overarching term to describe the pattern that is perceived in a series of narrative events.
Before moving on, it should be noted that while the terms *beginning*, *middle* and *end* suggest some essential correlation between the story and the chronology of the content, as the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard pointed out, these elements – a beginning, a middle and an end - need not appear ‘necessarily in that order’ (quoted in Sterritt, 1999: 20). In order to avoid the teleology associated with these three terms, then, I have preferred to adopt the more neutral terminology of *action*, *reaction* and *consequences*. These terms also have the advantage of being more descriptive of content. Finally, these terms are already widely used by authors, effectively identifying appropriate stages of a story. As author George Green expresses this notion, in the context of the novel: ‘Every action that takes place has a reaction, and then a reaction to the reaction, and so on, creating a linked chain of reactions. Actions have consequences, and those consequences themselves have consequences’ (2007: 152). Using this same vocabulary, teacher Linda J. Cowgill says, ‘A plot is developed through characters’ actions that lead to reactions and consequences that in turn create more reactions and consequences the characters must face’ (2008: 23).

Therefore, in simple terms, a story begins with an action: a narrative act that has an effect upon the hero, or a narrative act instigated by the hero. This is the part of the story where the hero encounters a challenge, a prospective intimacy, a monster, a potential partner or a puzzle. Next, the narrative is invariably developed by a reaction; that is, the narrated response to the action. This is where the challenge is addressed, the intimacy is experienced, the monster is fought, the potential partner is wooed or the clues to the puzzle are examined. Finally, events conclude with consequences: the storyworld’s logically consistent results following
the action and reaction. This is the part of the story where the challenges are met, where the intimacy is reflected upon, where monster fights and potential partners are either won or lost, or where puzzles are satisfactorily resolved. These elements of action, reaction and consequences, the core components of plot, are illustrated here using examples from Æsop and the Bible. 

The Hare was boasting of his speed before the other animals. 'I have never yet been beaten,' said he, 'when I put forth my full speed. I challenge any one here to race with me'.

The Tortoise said quietly, 'I accept your challenge'. 'That is a good joke,' said the Hare; 'I could dance round you all the way'. 'Keep your boasting till you've beaten,' answered the Tortoise. 'Shall we race?' So a course was fixed and a start was made. The Hare darted almost out of sight at once, but soon stopped and, to show his contempt for the Tortoise, lay down to have a nap.

The Tortoise plodded on and plodded on, and when the Hare awoke from his nap, he saw the Tortoise just near the winning-post and could not run up in time to save the race. Then said the Tortoise: 'Plodding wins the race'.

(Æsop, 1909/2011: 27-28)

Note also the nested arrangement of these same elements, action, reaction and consequences, in the framed narrative/story-within-a-story where Jesus tells his first parable. 

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12 It is appreciated that parables and fables are very different to the contemporary, classic and original fiction that will be discussed in this thesis. However, they are used here to illustrate the discussion of plot with short narratives that are, hopefully, familiar to a broad range of readers.

13 This story conforms to the pattern usually found in adventure stories.

14 It will be noted that the action, reaction and consequences of the story, and the action, reaction and consequences of the story-within-the-story, are differentiated with superscript A and B markers.
4 While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable:

5 ‘A farmer went out to sow his seed.

‘As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. 6 Some fell on the rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. 7 Other seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew with it and choked the plants.

8 ‘Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop a hundred times more than what was sown.

‘When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear".’ 9 His disciples asked him what this parable meant.

10 He said, ‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you; but to others I speak in parables, so that though seeing they may not see; though hearing they may not understand. 11 This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. 12 Those along the path are those who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. 13 Those on the rock are those who receive the word with joy when they hear it; but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. 14 The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. 15 But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a good crop.’

(Luke 8: 4-15, New International Version)

15 Interestingly, the A story in this parable uses the features of the mystery story whilst the B story relies on features of the adventure story.
This simple pattern occurs repeatedly in many examples of short fiction. It can be seen, for example, in the following, three celebrated stories. Thus, Franz Kafka’s ‘A Hunger Artist’ (Kafka, 1938/2012) begins with the notion of a hunger artist being introduced to the reader – a man who strives to be the best in his field (Action). There follows a Reaction, wherein the hunger artist continues to practise his art despite the obstacles of financial and physical hardship. Finally come the Consequences: the hunger artist achieves perfection in the art of starvation, and dies as a result. Second, in D.H. Lawrence’s ‘The Rocking-Horse Winner’ (Lawrence, 1926/2007), we have the following sequence. Action: Paul believes he needs ‘luck’ to overcome his family’s financial issues. Reaction: Paul acquires his luck by using both supernatural and practical methods. Consequences: Paul is able to resolve his family’s financial issues. Finally, in Raymond Carver’s ‘Cathedral’ (Carver, 1983), the following pattern can be perceived. Action: the narrator prepares to play host to a blind friend of his wife. Reaction: the presence of the blind friend threatens to upset the narrator’s relationship with his wife. Consequences: the narrator develops an improved perspective with the implication that this will help stabilise his marital relationship. These three examples are simplified here to illustrate the argument that the majority of short-fiction plots can be broken down into these core elements. Later in this thesis, it will be argued that the variations in the contents of these core elements of plot describe those component parts that are indicative of a narrative’s genre.

Reiterating Eco’s argument that ‘a text is a lazy machinery which forces its possible readers to do a part of its textual work’ (1981: 36), it is worth taking a closer examination of these three stories. I have interpreted Kafka’s ‘A Hunger
Artist’ and Lawrence’s ‘The Rocking-Horse Winner’ as syntactic adventure stories, where goals are set during the action stage of the narrative, obstacles are overcome in the reaction stage and, as consequences, the characters achieve a satisfactory resolution. Given that the central characters of both these stories die at their respective conclusions, it could be suggested that my interpretation of a ‘satisfactory resolution’ differs considerably from the norm. However, my interpretation depends on avoiding the semantic trap wherein we usually associate a hero’s death with an unsatisfactory outcome and, instead, subscribing to the syntactic logic of the story that shows us how a hero’s death can sometimes be appropriate and satisfactory. Later in this thesis I shall argue that the ‘satisfactory resolution’ of an adventure story lies only in fulfilling the conditions of the narrative. There is no implication that every adventure story should conclude with the words ‘and they all lived happily ever after’. Similarly, it will also be noted that ‘Cathedral’ is described here as a romance story, which could be considered an egregious simplification of Carver’s complex narrative. However, ignoring the absence of those semantic trappings that would place this narrative squarely within the realm of romantic fare, if we concentrate on the syntactic aspect, the plot takes on a different hue; that is, it becomes a plot which introduces a couple and then shows them striving to overcome the obstacles of jealousy, insecurity and lack of faith that are emotionally separating them. Seen in this light, the plot is not dissimilar from the notion of ‘Boy Meets Girl, But…’.

Obviously, these points will be discussed in much greater depth in future chapters. But I shall now move on to discuss the methodology of this thesis.
Chapter 2: Methodology

A Different Approach

As author and lecturer Zoë Fairbairns says, ‘if your ambition is to write short stories and get them published, read the work of people who have already done both these things’ (2011: 56). This is commonly reiterated advice and Fairbairns is not the only writer to advocate this approach: Annie Proulx suggests that writers can ‘develop craftsmanship through years of wide reading’ (2010: n.p.) and Ian Rankin simply advises writers to ‘[r]ead lots’ (2010: n.p.). As a lecturer in creative writing, I admit to delivering variations on this advice several times in each semester, usually to undergraduate students. My endorsement of this approach comes because this is my own preferred method of practice and I firmly believe anyone wishing to write successfully in a genre needs to read extensively within that genre.

However, for the purposes of this thesis I will be following an alternative to my personal approach to writing; namely, the suggestion that writers should write and not read. This is an approach advocated by several authors including the American author Chuck Wendig (2014: n.p.) and the science-fiction author Karen Traviss. Traviss argues vociferously against the advice that writers must read, dismissing the notion as a post hoc ergo propter hoc argument. She says:

The two processes are not inseparable. You can do one, or the other, or both, but you don't need to do one to be able to do the other. It's the same way that a male designer can design clothes for women without wanting to wear them, or a chef can create a dish even if she doesn't like some of the ingredients, and — well, as any professional can create something they don't use or consume. Or the way that a cardiac surgeon can operate on hearts without actually having a heart condition himself. (Traviss, 2017: n.p.)
Whilst I do not ordinarily subscribe to this method, I have adopted this different way of producing the fiction in this thesis because I am deliberately trying to pursue this enquiry through a practice-led approach; that is, researching the relationship between plot and genre by reflecting on my personal practice.

It is acknowledged that, because I have an extensive publication record, and I have spent several years working as a Creative Writing lecturer, I already have substantial prior knowledge of genre conventions. Consequently, whilst I did try to approach the creative task without preconceptions, armed only with a general reader’s understanding of the typical tropes and conventions of genre fiction, it is accepted that, like every writer, I am not able to start from such an uninformed position. Our society is immersed in a culture that is rich in every aspect of storytelling and, as David Lodge observes when discussing intertextuality, ‘all texts are woven from the tissues of other texts’ (1992: 98-99). Therefore, as a professional writer, it would be disingenuous for me to suggest that I was starting from a wholly uninformed position. So, contrary to my usual practice, I did begin writing without undertaking a programme of genre-specific reading, in order that my output was not overtly influenced by my having academically researched specific types of text.

This is an approach that follows my interpretation of the method outlined by Dominique Hecq in ‘Theory without Credentials’, where Hecq discusses a self-reflective style of methodology: the methodology of active consciousness (2013: 175-200). Hecq describes this as ‘the process of bringing to consciousness what
previously lay beneath its surface, namely something pre-conscious or unconscious’ (2013: 185). To use Hecq’s vocabulary, this allowed me to utilise resources from my pre-conscious or unconscious for the construction of the story. The subsequent self-reflective consideration of the stories has allowed me to consider them by adopting Hecq’s methodology of active consciousness. This aspect of the research is practice-led. As Hazel Smith and Roger Dean explain,

[[t]he term practice-led research [is] employed to make two arguments about practice which are often overlapping and interlinked: firstly, as just indicated, that creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs; secondly to suggest that creative practice – the training and specialised knowledge that creative practitioners have and the processes they engage in when making art – can lead to specialised research insights which can then be generalised and written up as research. (Smith and Dean, 2009: 5)]

Given that the experience of writing informs a theoretical response, and that the theoretical response will be used to shape future writing, it could be argued that the research is illustrative of praxis, under writer Robin Nelson’s definition of this concept as consisting of, or comprising, ‘theory imbricated with practice’ (2013: 5). However, even though there is a substantial attention to theory in this research, the practice came first and drove the research. Moreover, the approach described above demonstrates that it is the practice that has been imbricated with the theory, which does suggest that this should properly be described as practice-led research.

Of course there are other ways in which this research could have been tackled, but none of them would have been able to satisfy my phenomenological need to understand whether or not the notion of plot, as a component part of genre, is an intrinsic part of my own writing. Simply selecting a sample of classic or
contemporary short fiction, and then identifying and describing the component parts in a Proppian fashion, would not have indicated whether any of the identified aspects of action, reaction or consequences appeared in my own work. Admittedly, some aspects of that approach have been cited, as examples of existing fiction are discussed throughout this thesis, but the focus remains on the structure of my original fiction and the extent to which that structure conforms to the patterns that define syntactic genre structures.

One final note about the methodology concerns the length of ‘short fiction’, for there is no prescribed maximum or minimum word length for what constitutes short fiction. Poe (1903: 22), an exponent of the concept of ‘unity of impression’, argued that ‘there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art – the limit of a single sitting’. In many ways this could be likened to Alfred Hitchcock’s twentieth-century observation that ‘the length of a film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder’ (Rose, 1995). Poe went on to point out that:

If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression – for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed. (Poe, 1903: 22)

To that end, to maintain that unity of impression, each piece of short fiction discussed has a length that could feasibly be accommodated in a single sitting. The original fiction here therefore varies in length from the erotic fiction, ‘Victoria’s Hand’ which is only a little over 2,600 words, to the more substantial Science-
Fiction and Fantasy stories which both exceed 6,700 words in length. Although it is understood that most markets specify a word count for submitted fiction, the stories written here have not been created to conform to existing guidelines but have, instead, been written to the length needed to fully deliver an engaging narrative.

What follows now is a discussion of the five supergenres, with each piece of original short fiction being followed immediately by a discussion of the genre archetypes as they relate to classic and contemporary examples of comparable fiction, all of which is presented to support my argument that plot can be perceived as a component part of genre.

16 The full text of the Science-Fiction story ‘Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People’ is included in Appendix A. Only the first few pages of this story are included as a part of this thesis.
Chapter 3: The Horror Genre

The Pen

The pen should not have been out on his desk.

It was a Caran d’Ache 1010: one of an extremely limited edition. The pen’s length, from cap to nib, was fashioned from buttery yellow 18ct gold. The clip was set with a small VVS diamond. Engravings, along with the designed and cutaway sections of the golden shaft, worked together to suggest the gears and inner mechanisms of a craftsman engineered watch.

But the pen should not have been on his desk.

It should have been locked safe and secure in his drawer.

“Debbie?”

John walked toward the desk and plucked the pen from where it lay beside the open desk diary. He didn’t look at the date of the open page, or the text scrawled on that page. He wanted to consider these details but, on touching the pen, he frowned at its temperature. The Caran d’Ache 1010 was fashioned from cold gold. Yet it was as warm as though he had pulled it from someone’s softly sweated hand. The sensation of holding it filled John with the same disquieting revulsion he would have had from sitting on a warm toilet seat.

His nostrils tightened.

His upper lip curled.

“Debbie?”

It didn’t surprise him that she made no reply. He hadn’t raised his voice beyond a whisper this second time and he knew she was a floor above him and likely inert from exhaustion after a night’s gruelling labour at the local A&E. According to the red LED figures of the clock on his desk it was 6:07 and, unless
she’d changed her habits or her shift arrangements, Debbie would have been in bed for the meatiest part of the past two hours. She would have been there far too long for her to have been the one clutching the Caran d’Ache 1010 so it still remained warm at this hour of the morning.

He put the pen down beside the desk diary and walked through to the kitchen. His brow was furrowed. Two slices of lightly-browned toast. Strong, black coffee in a ceramic mug decorated with the chemical structure diagram of a caffeine molecule. And then he was back in front of his desk, sitting in the high-backed manager’s chair and frowning at the anomaly of the pen and the diary.

Was it really cursed?

The desk diary was open to the 27th.

It was an A4 diary, bound in black leather with a two page spread for each day. The 27th was the coming Saturday and, whilst John had no plans for that date, he saw five words had now been written at the top of the page. They were written in an unfamiliar hand: clumsy, cumbersome and awkward. Oily black ink glistened wet on the vellum as though the words had only just been placed there.

I must make a confession.

*

He never got round to mentioning the pen or the diary entry to Debbie. When she awoke she was in a hurry to get showered and return to the hospital.

“You did a full shift yesterday,” John complained. He had to raise his voice so she could hear him over the hiss of the shower. “Aren’t there laws against you nurses working too long?” He didn’t like the idea of anyone working until they were
so tired their judgement was compromised. It struck him as a recipe for potential disaster. Whether a person’s thoughts were distracted by tiredness, boredom or fear, no one ever achieved their goals when their judgement was compromised.

Debbie shrugged as she soaped her shoulders. “I’m doing two full shifts today. I’ll be doing the same tomorrow. I’ve traded with Sue Fields.”

She said the name as though he would know who she meant. John vaguely recalled that Debbie had mentioned a colleague called Sue before but he knew he hadn’t really been listening to that conversation. Debbie had a habit of speaking about people as though he knew her fellow nurses as well as she knew them.

He supposed he might have habits that she found equally irritating or annoying. It was unlikely, he conceded. But he considered himself sufficiently free from conceit to be aware that such a possibility could exist.

“Why have you traded?”

“Sue needs the time at home. She’s planning to do something nice for her girlfriend to celebrate their anniversary.”

*Girlfriend*, John thought despondently. He had thought lesbian nurses only existed in the cheapest bargain basement pornography. He wondered if that was an example of life imitating art, or if his definition of art was too broad to be applicable in this instance. He rubbed a hand against the stubble on his jaw trying to disguise his distraction and lack of interest.

*Was the pen really cursed?*

“I agreed.” Debbie was still talking. “Sue said she’d pay me back this weekend. That means you can take me round one of those car boot sales where you keep grabbing your fantastic bargains.”
It would have been the ideal time to mention the pen. He could have asked if she’d unlocked his office drawer and used his latest ‘fantastic bargain’ to begin a handwritten confession on a future date in the desk diary. The idea of broaching the issue struck him as fatuous and he refused to breathe life into the words.

It seemed more sensible to believe that the pen had written the words itself.

Debbie stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. Glistening droplets of water spilled from her plump pink curves. The droplets reminded him of the VVS diamond set in the Caran d’Ache.

“Which weekend are you going round a car boot with me?” he asked.

“This weekend. Saturday the twenty-seventh.”

* 

The following morning it didn’t surprise John to see the Caran d’Ache 1010 on the desk. Even though he had gone through the process of returning the pen to its presentation box the night before, and then locking the box securely in a drawer, a part of him had been expecting to find the pen on the desk beside his open diary.

The pen had been an incredible find.

The pristine condition of the packaging added to its enormous value.

He had found it in the possession of Stavros, a dodgy sometime-acquaintance of a carboot seller with no apparent idea what he was selling.

“How much?” John asked, dismissively examining the box.
“Top quality pen, Sir,” Stavros told him. His English was always broken at the start of negotiations. “You have pen for only two hundred of your British pounds. It very good bargain.”

John snorted and dropped the box back on the table.

Either the pen was stolen and excessively hot or Stavros was more stupid than John had previously considered. Those were the only reasons he could conceive the pen was being given away at such a bargain price. If his knowledge of the Caran d’Ache’s value was accurate, John figured he could realise at least £50,000. If he opened the sale to a global market, and providing he could avoid unwanted interest from authorities, John reckoned he could likely double that figure.

“I’ll give you a tenner for it.”

“Fuck off.”

Even for Stavros, it was a blunt retort.

John’s cheeks flushed crimson. The brutality of Stavros’s rebuttal made him determined to secure a greater bargain. “How about I give you a tenner and do you a favour?”

“What favour?”

John nodded in the direction of a tall man nearby. He had neatly trimmed hair and wore spotless jeans and an ironed T-shirt. “Let me have the pen for a tenner,” John told Stavros, “and I won’t tell that plain-clothes officer that you’re selling weed.”

The rest of the conversation went unspoken.
Stavros could have said he wasn’t selling weed. John could have told him the police would probably confirm as much after Stavros had spent a day in the cells instead of trading to a busy market of potential buyers.

“Give me twenty,” Stavros scowled, holding out his hand. His accent had disappeared. “Give me twenty. Take the pen. And I hope the fucking thing really is cursed.”

At the time John hadn’t put much credence in the parting comment.

Now he was beginning to suspect it wasn’t a spontaneous remark.

He paid twenty pounds and took the boxed pen carefully home to confirm its enormous worth. The box was large and as black as death. It had a velvet lined interior that housed a space for the pen and a nest for its complementary gold and glass bottle of ink. The box took up most of the space in the shadows of the bottom drawer of the desk. It was locked there with a key that he kept on the same ring with his car and house keys. The key was kept secure in the bottom of his jeans pocket, folded at the foot of his bed.

But again, this morning, the pen was on his desk.

The metal was warm to the touch.

The desk diary was open to the 27th.

None of this came as a complete surprise because a part of him had been expecting this development. More words had been written beneath the original five-word declaration of intent.

He didn’t read them.

Instead, John went through to the kitchen trying to think of how he could introduce the subject to Debbie. He didn’t want to come across as accusatory or alarmed. He felt sure she wasn’t the one writing in the diary. She didn’t have that
much imagination or that sort of sense of humour. But he hadn’t been doing the writing himself and he wanted to address the situation so Debbie could openly suggest her own interpretation of events.

Two slices of toast.

A blast of strong black coffee, this time in a mug labelled HTTP 404 error – witty caption not found. He returned to the office to consider the situation. Settling himself in the high-backed manager’s chair he saw that three more words had been written beneath the original sentence. The page now said:

I must make a confession.

I killed Debbie.

He decided immediately that Debbie did not need to know about this. He closed the diary, returned the pen to its box and locked it securely in the drawer. A shiver of unease nestled at the back of his neck, as though he was being considered by some invisible entity.

He wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of that thought.

But, as much as he wanted to splutter laughter, the sound refused to pass his lips. He didn’t dare to turn around and confirm that there was nothing leering behind him. He couldn’t find the courage to assure himself that there weren’t bloodless serpentine lips whispering close to the nape of his neck.

Once Debbie had woken, washed and made her way to work, John went online to locate a paranormal investigator. He felt foolish typing the words into Google but there were local hits and he found one website with a mobile number. The woman described herself as a psychic and paranormal investigator.

“Tabitha?” he asked doubtfully.

“Talitha,” she corrected. “Who is this?”
A querulous part of his nature wanted to say, “You’re the one who claims to be a psychic. You tell me who I am.” He quashed the urge. He knew he would get nowhere through being confrontational. “I saw your website.”

“Well?”

“Paranormal investigation.”

“Oh. OK. Cool. How can I help you?”

*

When Talitha arrived at his house she looked annoyingly unremarkable. He had expected some suggestion of witchiness with crazy white hair or maybe dramatic gothic makeup or those ridiculously long fingernails that always made him wonder how a person wiped their backside. Talitha had lank black hair and a swarthy complexion with a rash of pimples on one cheek. She looked like every gum-chewing checkout girl he’d ever seen operating the graveyard shift in Tesco.

“It’s cursed,” she said, when he showed her the pen.

John blinked. It was a surprisingly swift analysis.

“What makes you say it’s cursed?”

“I’ve seen it before. A friend of my brother had it. Stavros. I told him to get rid of the curse by palming the pen off on some other mug.”

John bristled. “How do I get rid of the curse?”

“Do the same as him. Palm it off on som-”

He didn’t let her finish. “It’s worth money.”

“It’s cursed with the spirit of a malevolent entity. It’s a spirit that will kill. It’s cursed by a spirit that controls snake demons and they will-“
“It’s worth money.” He couldn’t understand why she wasn’t acknowledging that important fact. “It’s worth a lot of money.”

“The pen is cursed,” she broke in. “It doesn’t matter how much money it’s worth. All it’s worth to you right now is misery and death. If you want to live – if you want your loved ones to live – you’ll get rid of it.”

John tried not to smirk at the melodrama of fearing for the lives of his loved ones. Talitha clearly didn’t have the psychic powers she claimed on her website. The psychic demanded a twenty pound consultation fee.

With a challenging smirk, John offered her the pen.

Talitha shook her head. “Over the next few days you’ll lose loved ones. You’ll be visited by harbingers of death. And, unless you get rid of that pen, you’ll be dead by the time the 27th has ended. I’m offering you honest and helpful advice here. Do you really want to fuck me about?”

“I’m not giving you twenty notes. You’ve done nothing to earn it.”

She called him a prick and slammed the door as she left.

*  

He didn’t bother reading the diary the next morning.

The pen was out, sitting by the side of the page. He didn’t need to touch it to know it would still be warm. He saw that more words had been written on the page. John slammed the diary closed before his inquisitive gaze interpreted any of the characters.

“What’s wrong?”
He hadn’t noticed Debbie sitting in the office’s oxblood Chesterfield chair. He jumped, startled by her presence. Her face looked bruised from crying.

“Nothing’s wrong with me,” John said quickly. “You’re up early. What’s wrong with you? You look upset.”

She shook her head as though refusing to tell him. Despite her best efforts the words spilled out. “Bad night at A&E,” she whispered. The words were choked between the threat of tears. “There was an unpleasant death.”

“What happened? Was it someone you know? I mean knew?”

She shook her head. “Maybe. I don’t think so. I’m not sure. He was wearing a fluffy sweater with an owl on the front. It looked like something a guy would wear at Christmas for a bet. He’d been bitten by something. Something venomous and cruel and nasty. He was babbling hysterically when he was admitted to A&E. But, when I got in the room, he grabbed hold of my sleeve and stopped babbling. He called me by my name and he started to speak with chilling clarity.”

A rash of goosebumps bristled along John’s forearms.

“What did he say?”

“Who’s Karen Dash?”

“Never heard of her. Why?”

“That’s what this guy said. He said, ‘Debbie, You’re going to die unless you tell John to get rid of Karen Dash.’ I’m sure that was the name he used. He said, ‘Debbie, you must ask him about Karen Dash. Ask about the pen.’” She blinked and stared miserably into a dusty corner of the office. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“How bizarre,” John muttered. “And he called you Debbie?”
“Those were the only English words he spoke. When his family turned up they were so Greek we had to bring in an interpreter. They said they had no idea who Karen Dash might be. They’d got no idea how he supposedly knew me. Or you. They said they didn’t even know their son could speak English.”

John raised his eyebrows and wondered if he could use the words, ‘how bizarre’ for a second time, without drawing attention to the guilty blush that he knew was now colouring his cheeks.

“He died,” Debbie added. “And the sad thing is, I can’t even recall his face. Even though he was staring at me intensely when he delivered his message, I can only see the big-eyed, stupid owl face that was plastered to the front of his sweater.”

John ushered her off to bed. He gave her a large enough shot of Irish drinking chocolate to ensure that she would sleep. As soon as he was confident that Debbie had drifted off he called Tabitha.

“Talitha,” she corrected. “And you didn’t pay me for last consultation so I’m hanging up on you now.”

“What’s the significance of owls?”

“I’m hanging up on you now,” she told him.

“Owls,” he repeated. He knew it was important. And he felt sure that Talitha would know something that might be of value. “Some Greek bloke wearing a shirt with an owl gave my girlfriend a warning last night. What’s the significance of Greeks and owls?”

“Your pen is cursed by a Greek spirit. A taraxippus, to give it its correct name. Owls are harbingers, John. Death is coming. Get rid of the pen. Whatever profit margin is involved, it’s not worth it.”
“Help me. Find me a buyer for the pen. I’ll split the profit with you.”

“You’ve had all the help you’re getting from me.”

The line went dead.

He glared at the phone for a moment before coming to a decision. He would watch for the rest of the confession. He closed the desk diary, locked the Caran d’Ache 1010 back in its box, and then settled himself into his high-backed manager’s chair. If the cursed entity, the taraxippus, was going to make another entry, John was determined to catch it in the act and make a personal plea for mercy.

*

He woke up stiff and bursting to pee.

The diary was open. The pen sat beside it. A full sheet had almost been completed in the clumsy, awkward hand. The oily black ink sat fresh and wet on the vellum.

John refused to let himself read the words.

He went to the loo, washed his hands, and then went to the kitchen.

Two slices of toast. A strong blast of coffee in a plain white mug. Reluctant to return to his office he sat in the kitchen as he sipped at the drink.

There was no sign that Debbie had stirred from her rest. He assumed she was exhausted from the emotional stress of all that had happened in A&E the previous night.

*Previous night? Are you sure?*
The toast was hard and dry in his mouth. He checked the sell-by date on the bread and saw that it said the 24th. He figured it was still in date until he checked his wristwatch and saw that the date had shifted to the 27th.

*How long was I sitting in that chair?*

The stiffness in his lower back and knees suddenly seemed significant. He took his mug of coffee and tiptoed gingerly back to the office.

The diary was open.

The Caran d’Ache 1010 sat by the side of the book. John took his seat in the high-backed manager’s chair and reached for a pair of reading glasses. It felt suddenly cold in the room, as though the temperature had dropped. He drew a deep breath and steeled himself for what the text might reveal. He leant close to the page and read.

*I must make a confession.*

*I killed Debbie.*

*Do you want to know why? I could tell you about her sins and infidelities. I could tell you about her lies or her stupidity. But, the truth is, she was one of my necessary sacrifices to the deity Chronos. It’s because of her death, and the death of those like her, that this cursed pen can make marks on these page days before I’ve written them.*

*Debbie’s lying upstairs in her bed now, as I write this. My serpents fed from her until she stopped breathing. Her blood remains under my finger nails.*

*But Debbie is not my only victim.*

*I killed the harbinger in the hospital.*

*I killed Stavros and Talitha.*
I’ve made a lot of sacrifices over the past few days because Chronos is a demanding deity and insists on a substantial tribute.

But to address the question of why: Chronos has promised me a chance of life. In exchange for the sacrifice of five lives, Chronos will grant me passage to the mortal realm.

The only thing left to do now is kill you, John. I’ll be able to do that when you’re reading the last part of this confession. Until it’s too late, you won’t even know that I’m standing behind you, with my serpents ready to feed from your flesh after you’ve read these final words.

THE END
Analysis of the Horror Genre and its Associated Plot

The table below shows the syntactic structure of a short horror plot, as well as the content of ‘The Pen’, with both narratives broken down to give a description of their categories of action, reaction and consequences. As will be demonstrated during the subsequent discussion, the plot of ‘The Pen’ contains the typical attributes of the syntactic structure of the plot that is associated with the horror genre.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
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<tr>
<td>Horror</td>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B.</td>
<td>Character A demonstrates a consistently logical response to the conflict presented in the action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Pen</td>
<td>John has become the owner of a supernaturally controlled pen.</td>
<td>John tries to find ways of getting rid of the pen, without incurring a financial penalty.</td>
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In the opening line of ‘The Pen’, John (Character A) is brought into conflict with the pen (Entity B): ‘The pen should not have been out on his desk’. Because the story is presented from a third-person narrative perspective, specifically John’s

17 Because the genre of horror deals often with the supernatural, Entity B in this genre can be seen in a wide range of familiar guises from vampires (such as ‘Abraham’s Boys’, J. Hill, 2005), werewolves (such as ‘The Forest of Villefère’ R. E. Howard, 1925), ghosts (such as that in ‘The Judge’s House’, B. Stoker, 1951) and a range of other-worldly tropes that populate horror fiction (such as the precognitive dream in ‘Harvey’s Dream’, (S. King, 2009: 83-92). Further, because the rubric of the term ‘horror’ is also used to include stories of antisocial societies (such as the bloodthirsty diners in ‘The Champion’, R. Laymon, 2000, 79-85), psychopathic tendencies (such as Karen and Wade’s depraved appetites in ‘I’m not a Criminal’, R. Laymon, 2000: 122-142), as well as general catastrophes and disasters (such as the semantic detail of the nuclear explosion in ‘Graduation Afternoon’, S. King, 2009: 171-176), Entity B can also represent any embodiment of these typically undesirable activities, behaviours and events.
perspective, the reader is immediately introduced to this story’s Character A with
the obvious cue to the narrator’s point of view coming from the statement that the
pen is on *his* desk. Entity B, the pen, is mentioned in the first two words of the
story, and the presence of conflict is indicated with the idea that the pen should *not*
have been on the desk, describing a situation that appears to be contrary to the
narrator’s expectations.

Before continuing, it is worth dwelling for a moment on what is meant by the term
‘conflict’ and some of the ways in which Entity B can be seen as the catalyst for
that conflict. Conflict can be perceived as a broad and somewhat generic term
when used as part of the vocabulary of creative writing. Author Victoria Lynn
Schmidt (2005) suggests six distinct types of conflict: relational, situational, inner,
paranormal, cosmic and social. However, as Schmidt observes:

> Conflict, at its core, is the opposition of forces that serve to advance the
> plot. It can be between people, about ideas, or from natural or man-
> made circumstances. In some stories and even individual scenes,
> several different types of Conflict are present at the same time.
> (Schmidt, 2005: 7)

It is true that there are different types of conflict in different types of fiction.
Moreover, there are substantial differences between the conflicts found in
narratives associated with different genres. The conflict in a romance, a conflict
that Schmidt would likely describe as relational in nature, will be different in
content and focus from the paranormal conflict found in a typical horror narrative.
Similarly, there are enormous differences between the situational conflict that is
typically found in the puzzle at the centre of a mystery story and the situational
conflict that is shown when characters are identifying and pursuing objectives in
the adventure story. However, despite their differences, it is worth remembering that these features are all types of conflict. Matt Morrison, who argues that there are only three types of conflict - social, personal and environmental - says ‘[c]onflict is the condition of human life. It is therefore the essence of story and character’ (2010: 27). If this is the case, then it could be argued that each genre of short fiction is governed by a specific type of conflict. To that end we will see a horror plot being driven by a conflict between fear and security. The presence of such binary opposites sits at the heart of all five plots identified in this thesis. Therefore, a romance plot is driven by a conflict between the prospects of unification or separation. An erotic plot is driven by a conflict between propriety and impropriety. A mystery plot is driven by a conflict between ignorance and information. And, finally, an adventure plot is driven by a conflict between failure and achievement. Nevertheless, because conflict is so essential to story and character, even though it is acknowledged that there are these different types of conflict within each plot, it is sufficient for the purposes of this thesis to use the broad term conflict to identify this common feature of a narrative, rather than complicating matters by referring to specific variations.

It could be argued that Entity B in ‘The Pen’ is not really the pen but the taraxippus, the supernatural entity controlling the pen. However, the concept of this mythical presence is not identified until more than 2,800 words into the narrative, a substantial way toward the conclusion of a story that is only 3,500 words in length, and more firmly situated in the latter part of the plot’s reaction stage. Nevertheless, whilst it is true that the taraxippus is not explicitly mentioned until more than 80 per cent of the story has elapsed, the taraxippus does present,
from the opening line, a conflict for John by manipulating the pen in an unnatural fashion. It is the interaction between John and the unnaturally manipulated pen that conveys this horror story’s sense of the paranormal, and allows Character A to be brought into conflict by desiring security or safety but having to face the fear that comes from Entity B.

Similar relationships between Character A and Entity B have been used in other short horror stories. In Poe’s ‘The Masque of the Red Death’, the threat of plague is embodied by a supernatural mummer who does not make an appearance in the narrative until more than two thirds of the story have elapsed. However, Entity B in ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ is not the horror presented by a supernatural mummer. Entity B in ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ is the virulent plague named in the title. Again, this is a horrific concept that is introduced in the story’s opening line: ‘The “Red Death” had long devastated the country’ (1842/1992: 386). Invariably, regardless of the guise that is used to place it in the story, Entity B and the fear that it brings is the presence that causes the conflict with Character A and his need for security during the action stage of the horror plot.

The action stage of the horror plot, the stage where Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B, can be seen through many stories that are traditionally associated with the horror genre. In the first paragraph of ‘A Warning to the Curious’ (M. R. James, 2013: 96-121), the reader is introduced to characters who are brought into conflict with the dangerously haunted marshes that are later deemed responsible for the death of the unfortunate character, Paxton. During the action stage of ‘Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper’ (Robert Bloch, 2011), Sir Guy Hollis,
a detective whose life has been defined by the conflict that comes with trying to identify and locate the notorious serial killer mentioned in the title, appears to be on the verge of capturing his adversary. In the action stage of ‘The Companion’ (Ramsey Campbell, 1994), the reader is introduced to Mr Stone, an individual who has spent his adult life in constant conflict with a childhood fear that death lurks in the dark. Each of these horror stories and many more besides, although vastly different in their content and their delivery, follow this same pattern of introducing Character A who is in conflict with Entity B. These attributes of the action stage are representative of most, if not all, horror plots.

Before continuing to discuss commonalities in the action, reaction and consequences of the horror plot, it is worth reflecting on the mechanics of writing this story. The idea for ‘The Pen’ was conceived from the desire to write about a character facing a supernatural entity. King says that horror narratives ‘always do their work on two levels’ (1981: 17). He goes on to talk about a ‘gross-out level’ of gore and graphic description, which he contrasts with the sophisticated concepts of horror stories that touch readers at the ‘most primitive level’ (1981: 18). With this story, I have tried to focus the horrific content on that primitive level, rather than attempting to disturb the reader with graphic description. Simply put, I thought the idea of writing about a character interacting with a seemingly sentient pen would be sufficiently unsettling to sustain a short horror story.

As noted above, this approach is not the way I usually approach the discipline of creative writing. Obviously, this approach can be likened to the ‘geneplore’ model
of creativity as defined by Professor Brady Wagoner, ‘in which we first generate possibilities and then explore them’ (2015: 22). As Ronald A. Finke, et al explain:

In the initial, generative phase, one constructs mental representations called preinventive structures, having various properties that promote creative discovery. These properties are then exploited during an exploratory phase in which one seeks to interpret the preinventive structures in meaningful ways. (1992: 17)

Initially I had a vague idea about a sentient pen: a ‘preinventive structure’ in the vocabulary of Finke et al. During the ‘exploratory phase’ of this approach, I considered various ways in which the pen’s actions could be perceived as being unsettling. However, whilst the geneplore model does provide some useful vocabulary for identifying aspects of the process of creation, the ethos that usually supports my personal approach is closer to the notion of creativity defined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2007). Discussing creativity as a cultural phenomenon, Csikszentmihalyi argues that it ‘is a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed. New songs, new ideas, new machines are what creativity is about’ (2007: 14). Importantly, as Csikszentmihalyi also notes, creativity should not be solely associated with the contribution of the individuals who seem most responsible for a novel idea or a new thing. Their contribution, while necessary and important, is only a link in a chain, a phase in a process. [...] To say that the theory of relativity was created by Einstein is like saying that it is the spark that is responsible for the fire. The spark is necessary, but without air and tinder there would be no flame. (2007: 13)

It is this theory of the individual not being solely responsible for every aspect of his or her creative outputs that has always underpinned my own approach to writing. Ordinarily, when writing any piece, I make an extensive study of contemporary market requirements with the aim of producing a text that satisfies these demands.

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To produce short stories without knowing what an editor needs or what audiences are currently reading or expecting is, for me, an extremely unconventional and, too often, an unproductive approach to writing. However, rather than discussing the theoretical aspects of creativity in any further depth, and potentially diverging too far from the focus of this thesis, it might be more appropriate to consider the motives other writers have cited for their involvement with writing, before I return to my personal motivations.

It is interesting to see that in Why We Write, Meredith Maran’s collection of interviews with acclaimed contemporary authors, the majority of contributors stated that they were compelled to write because they perceived writing to be an essential activity. Writer Gish Jen claims, ‘I don’t think about why I’m writing any more than I think about why I’m breathing. Its absence is bad, just as not breathing would be bad’ (Maran, 2013: 75). A little less dramatically, author Sara Gruen says, ‘The only thing that makes me crazier than writing is not writing’ (Maran, 2013: 59). However, my thoughts are more closely related to the pragmatism supporting poet Mary Karr’s observation: ‘I have a kind of primitive need to leave a mark on the world. Also, I have a need for money’ (Maran, 2013: 92).

Returning to my own motivations, while I recognise the existential necessity expressed by Jen and Gruen, above, which is endorsed by author Julia Casterton’s claim that ‘people write because they need to’ (2007: 1), I do think there are other forces behind my motivation. I write for the personal satisfaction that comes from being published. I write to maintain or develop an existing readership. I write for the money. Each of these motivations – publication,
promotion and payment – is achieved by satisfying the needs of an anticipated audience. Furthermore, the ability to satisfy these needs is most easily met by thoroughly investigating what the anticipated audience requires. However, with the creation of ‘The Pen’ my motivation for writing had to be less mercenary, which had an impact on the approach that was taken. I was writing ‘The Pen’ to create a horror story that would describe an uncanny situation. As with all the other stories presented in these pages, with the exception of the erotic story ‘Victoria’s Hand’, I was writing this piece without allowing myself the luxury of researching the potential audience for a specific market.

While discussing inspiration and approaches to writing with horror writer Adam Nevill, he noted that his own approach to producing horror fiction was often dictated by commissions: ‘Most horror stories are invitations to write for specific themes. I accept subjects that interest me and immediately provoke ideas, or tap into notions I've already been distilling or formulating’ (Nevill, 2015). On the subject of those stories that are not commissioned for a specific audience, he added:

[s]ome stories just come to me as a set of images relating to personal experience that becomes mutated grotesquely in my imagination, so the story is a parable to something I have experienced but is utterly abstract and unidentifiable to that experience or those people, except for me. I write these ‘on spec’ and eventually I will be asked for a general horror story. These are my most memorable stories but seem to get rejected twice before someone buys them - they also are the ones that appear in ‘Best of Horror’ collections. ‘Doll Hands’ and ‘Pig Thing’ were two such stories that had to wait until they touched a certain kind of editor's tastes (Nevill, 2015).\(^{18}\)

In some ways ‘The Pen’ came about through a similar process: a set of images relating to personal experience, including the desire to own a prestigious pen and the wariness that comes from buying second-hand goods. These are experiences that have ‘mutated grotesquely’ in my imagination, transforming themselves into the story that is ‘The Pen’. It would be prudent to acknowledge at this point that, after establishing the concept of a pen that writes threatening messages for its owner, other themes of the uncanny needed to be presented to the reader during the reaction stage of the plot.

James Scott Bell breaks stories down into three acts and observes, ‘Writers sometimes refer to the infamous “Act II Problem,” which boils down to this: how do you keep readers interested through that long portion of the novel?’ (2004: 85). This second act of the novel compares with the reaction stage of the short story as described in this thesis. Bell’s solution to the “Act II Problem” is to stretch the narrative tension and raise the stakes for the characters between the beginning and the end. For example, in the reaction stage of ‘The Pen’, John learns more about the threat that is posed by the taraxippus. This is also the stage of the story where John consults with Talitha and discovers that the pen is cursed. There is mention of harbingers and there is more inexplicable text appearing in the pages of his desk diary. All of this is presented in the reaction stage of the story to stretch the narrative tension, raise the stakes for the characters, and increase the conflict until it can be increased no further. More importantly, all of this conforms to the idea that the reaction stage of a horror plot is the place where ‘Character A demonstrates a consistently logical response to the conflict presented in the action’. John, who still wants to turn a profit but does not want to succumb to the
curse of the pen, tries to find a way of selling the pen and avoiding the fate it carries.

The attributes of this reaction stage, namely these consistently logical responses to the conflict presented by Entity B, are present in the plots of a broad range of stories that are typically associated with the horror genre. In ‘The Boogeyman’ (King, 1978), the narrator, Billings, who believes that a demonic boogeyman has murdered his children and is now pursuing him, tells his psychiatrist of the actions he took to protect his family. Billings did not want his children to grow up emotionally damaged or stifled by overprotective parenting, nor did he want his children harmed by a creature that common sense tells him does not exist. The reaction stage of the plot shows this character making consistently logical responses to the conflict that comes from his fear of the boogeyman. Similarly, in ‘Last Breath’ (Joe Hill, 2005), after a family has found itself in a museum of silence where last breaths are collected and displayed, the reaction stage of the plot reveals more details about the perverse nature of the collection, much to the chagrin of the family’s sceptical mother. Her reactions to the curator’s outrageous claims, his assertion that the sighs of the dying can be stored in bell-jars and heard through special equipment, are consistently logical responses to the plot’s conflict. Even in ‘The Tomb’ (H. P. Lovecraft, 1969), where the narrator, Jervas Dudley, is incarcerated in a ‘refuge for the demented’, the reaction stage of the plot remains consistently logical for the skewed beliefs of Dudley. Dudley delivers a framed narration where the action stage reveals his obsessive and unhealthy interest in a locked tomb which he discovered near his family home. During the consequent reaction stage of the narrative, Dudley explains how he gained access
to the tomb, why it satisfied his curiosity, and the importance of the connection he made with the spirits he encountered there. Outside the world of fiction, and away from the world of supernatural credulity, such beliefs and motives would not be considered logical. However, for a disturbed character like Jervas Dudley, an investment in the paranormal details of a haunted tomb are logical. Repeatedly in short horror fiction, the reaction stage of the plot follows this same pattern where characters respond to conflict in a fashion that is consistently logical.

Of course, it can be argued that the reaction stage of all fiction follows this same process of a consistently logical response to narrative conflict. In a short romance plot the characters are motivated to form a relationship and their responses can usually be perceived as logical within the parameters of the narrative. Interest inspires attraction and attraction inspires the desire to form a relationship. Equally, the reaction stage of the short mystery plot, where the central character is trying to solve a puzzle, is often presented as a logical investigation into cause and effect, or honesty and duplicity, or means and motivation. Even the reaction stage of short erotic fiction, where the central characters become intimate, can be argued to be logical in execution as desire leads to arousal, arousal leads to intimacy, and intimacy leads to satisfaction. However, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters of this thesis, the consistently logical response to conflict is only a defining feature of the reaction stage in the horror plot. The reaction stage of the romance plot focuses on characters encountering the various obstacles that threaten to impede their relationship. Whilst logical responses can be a factor, they are not as essential as the presence of obstacles in the short romance plot. Although approaches to the resolution of a puzzle can often be logical, logic is not
a necessity in the mystery plot. The reaction stage of the mystery plot is invariably driven by the uncovering of the metaphorical pieces of the plot’s puzzle and these components can be revealed in a variety of ways. Likewise in short erotic fiction, the focus of the reaction stage rests on the intimacy being presented rather than on any logic associated with the character(s) striving to achieve satisfaction. It is true of the reaction stage, as David Harris Ebenbach argues, that ‘[i]n the middle, conflict increases and increases until it can increase no further’ (2003: 63). However, it will be shown that this increase in conflict is presented differently in each plot and its associated genre; and it will be acknowledged that the increase in conflict for the short horror plot comes from Character A demonstrating a consistently logical response to the problems posed by Entity B.

Unlike the satisfying ‘Happily Ever After’ (HEA) conclusions associated with romance, the genre that will be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis, the typical horror story, concludes with a partial resolution. As teacher Benjamin W. McCraw notes:

the protagonist of a horror story / movie doesn’t really live ‘happily ever after’ due to the carnage, death, and destruction often bobbing in the wake of the struggle to survive the ordeal and slay the evil demon / ghost / monster / killer / alien / whatever. The hero/ine comes out bloodied and exhausted, done with an experience that will no doubt cause serious physical, emotional, and psychological trouble. No one leaves a horror story unscathed. (McCraw, 2014: n.p.)

This is not to say that there is never a HEA for the protagonist of a horror story. There can be happy endings, but the consequences of the story are usually only a

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19 These differences in the reaction stages of different plots will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis, under the relevant chapter headings of each genre.
partial resolution, with the prospect of Entity B either triumphing over Character A, or potentially returning after the conclusion of the narrative to provide further conflict. Author J. F. Gonzalez describes this sort of conclusion as the ‘It Lives! Ending’:

[t]he ‘It Lives! Ending’ is very popular in most horror novels and is pretty self-explanatory. [...] It could be temporarily disabled somehow (by occult means or whatever you come up with), but capable of returning again. The evil could have moved on or could be in hiding, unbeknown to the main characters your readers have come to know and love. Whatever the case, you must convey to the reader that this evil could rise again someday. (Gonzalez, 2010: 21-22)

The conclusion of ‘The Pen’ conforms to this description, as can be seen in the final lines of the letter written by the taraxippus:

_The only thing left to do now is kill you, John. I’ll be able to do that when you’re reading the last part of this confession. Until it’s too late, you won’t even know that I’m standing behind you, with my serpents ready to feed from your flesh after you’ve read these final words._

John is reading the letter. The reader is aware that the taraxippus is going to kill John. Moreover, once John has fallen victim to the creature’s murderous appetites, there will undoubtedly be other supernatural deaths to follow. Whilst the story hopefully provides a satisfactory conclusion for the reader, the conclusion for the storyworld belonging to the characters can only be described as a partially satisfactory resolution. The taraxippus has not been vanquished. The conflict that is exemplified by its monstrous need to kill will clearly continue.

These attributes of the horror plot’s consequences stage, the attributes where the conflict is only partially resolved, can be seen in all the previous examples of horror fiction that have been cited so far in this chapter. The final line from Poe’s
‘Masque of the Red Death’ says ‘Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all’ (1992: 391). Certainly, this conclusion is a triumph for the red death, but, for the reader, the consequences stage of this plot is only a partial resolution because it leaves some unanswered questions. If the Red Death holds illimitable dominion over all, does that mean the disease has wiped out all humanity from that storyworld, or only those guests who were residing in Prince Prospero’s castellated abbey? If there are plagues as inescapable as the Red Death, do any of us ever have a hope of avoiding their effects? The conclusion suggests that the conflict is only partially resolved and may likely continue. In ‘A Warning to the Curious’, Paxton’s death is an unsolved mystery with the narrator suggesting the victim was killed by a supernatural entity that haunts the marshlands of Seaburgh. This lack of a definitive explanation, where the reader cannot be wholly sure who killed Paxton or why, and with the unwritten suggestion that such events could occur again, is typical of the horror plot’s partially resolved consequences stage.

In ‘Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper’, Sir Guy Hollis is murdered by John Carmody, an action that comes with the revelation that Jack the Ripper is still alive. The psychiatrist in ‘The Boogeyman’ is discovered to be the boogeyman, a boogeyman who had been deliberately making Billings’s life a misery and throughout the story has been hiding behind a psychiatrist’s mask. The conclusions to both these stories are satisfying to the reader. However, in both these cases, the consequences are only a partial resolution for the characters because there is a suggestion that the menace that has been fuelling the plot’s conflict will continue. Jack Carmody/Jack the Ripper will continue to murder. The boogeyman will either
continue to make Billings’s life a misery, or he will find another family to torment.

On a similar note, in the aforementioned stories ‘The Companion’, ‘Last Breath’ and ‘The Tomb’, the consequences stage of each plot shows that the conflict, which the central characters have been trying to address, is not fully resolved. Stone, the central character of ‘The Companion’, finds himself holding hands with Death in the darkness of a ghost train. The reader does not find out if Death claims Stone, or if Stone escapes from this horrific situation. The consequences simply conclude with Stone being exposed to his greatest fear: a fear he had been trying to avoid throughout the narrative. The museum of silence in ‘Last Breath’ continues to operate and, with the end of the story, has another macabre artefact for its collection: the last breath of the family’s sceptical mother. In ‘The Tomb’, Jarvas Dudley has sown seeds of doubt about his sanity and the truth of his claims, but the narrative reveals that the spirits within the tomb are waiting for him. The implication with all of these consequences is that the horror is not yet over and the conflict is not fully resolved.

So far, of course, this discussion has only considered the relationship between ‘The Pen’ and the typical syntactic structure of the horror plot. Looking briefly at the semantic features of ‘The Pen’, which include an enchanted pen, a demonic presence, a curse, a medium, and mystical harbingers, it is clear that the story is written to meet the needs of a readership interested in tales of the macabre and the uncanny. However, rather than focusing on the superficial details of the semantic aspects of genre, details and furnishings which are not pertinent to the plot, this thesis is considering the relatively underexplored structure of the genre’s syntactic aspect.
To that end, and to illustrate the attributes of the short horror plot, the content of the action, reaction and consequences stages, and to show how these attributes follow a similar pattern, it is worth looking at the following three examples of relatively well-known short horror fiction: ‘A Cask of Amontillado’ by Edgar Allan Poe (1846/1992: 416-422); ‘The Outsider’ by H. P. Lovecraft (1926), and ‘W.S.’ by L. P. Hartley (1951: 92-107).

‘A Cask of Amontillado’ (1846). Action: Montresor vows revenge on Fortunato for a perceived insult. Reaction: Montresor lures Fortunato into an underground wine cellar. Consequences: Fortunato is entombed behind a wall in the cellar and Montresor’s vengeance is slaked.

‘The Outsider’ (1926). Action: the narrator is trapped in an underground castle. Reaction: the narrator escapes but is frightened by the sight of a hideous monster. Consequences: the narrator learns the hideous monster was his reflection – he is the hideous monster.

‘W.S.’ (1951). Action: Walther Streeter, an author, receives curious postcards from a mysterious correspondent. Reaction: Streeter becomes concerned that the correspondence is threatening. Consequences: Streeter is killed by the correspondent – a fictional entity of his own creation.

In narrative terms the action part of each of the above plots accurately reflects the definition given at the beginning of this section: Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B, and this conflict, between the concepts of fear and security, is
repeated. In ‘The Outsider’, Character A is the unnamed narrator. In ‘A Cask of Amontillado’, Character A is Montresor. In ‘W.S.’, this role goes to Streeter. Entity B, as mentioned before, is a concept specific to each story and usually representative of each narrative’s particular investment in a mode of horror. In the examples discussed here it is easy to see that Entity B is Streeter’s mysterious correspondent, W.S.. Similarly, for Lovecraft’s unnamed narrator in ‘The Outsider’, it is apparent that Entity B is the underground castle, an obvious example of John Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy. However, Entity B in ‘A Cask of Amontillado’ is not the story’s other character, Fortunato. For this tale to be considered a horror story, rather than a simple description of criminal assault and kidnapping, Entity B would need to be Montresor’s unnatural, psychopathic need for revenge.

The key attribute for the reaction stage of the short-fiction horror plot is illustrated by Character A demonstrating a consistently logical response to the conflict presented in the action stage. In ‘A Cask of Amontillado’, Montresor lures Fortunato into an underground wine cellar. For a rational human being, this would not be a logical action. However, for Poe’s unbalanced narrator, driven by an unjust need for revenge, this is a consistently logical (or, perhaps, patho-logical) reaction. In ‘W.S.’, Streeter becomes concerned that his correspondent is potentially hostile. The fear is consistently logical because the tone of the letters has become threatening as Hartley develops the narrative tension. In ‘The Outsider’, Lovecraft’s narrator escapes from the underground castle where he was held (escape being an action consistently logical in response to imprisonment) but is frightened by the sight of a hideous monster.
The consequences of the short-fiction horror plot address the conflict between Character A and Entity B and provide a partially resolved conclusion. In ‘W.S.’, Streeter is killed by a fictional entity of his own creation. The entity is a fictional villain that Streeter had been authoring and, whilst Streeter’s death resolves his involvement with the story, there is no subsequent mention of Entity B being apprehended or stopped from committing further murders. The conflict between Character A and Entity B has been addressed but the conclusion is only partially resolved. Similarly, in ‘A Cask of Amontillado’, Montresor leaves Fortunato entombed behind a wall in a wine cellar, briefly satisfying the character’s need for revenge. The conclusion of the story is only partially resolved because there is no suggestion of justice or retribution for Montresor’s actions. In Lovecraft’s ‘The Outsider’, the narrator learns that the hideous monster he saw was his own reflection. The hideous monster finds other hideous monsters and becomes part of a terrible community of monsters. The consequences stage addresses the conflict between the character’s desire to escape from solitude and find a community. However, whilst providing a partial conclusion, that outcome does not resolve the issue that Lovecraft’s narrator has left a hideous community of monsters freely roaming in the night.

This discussion of the short-fiction horror plot, so far, has considered several different stories, written by different authors for different audiences. However, when we consider the plots broken down into their action, reaction and consequence stages, distinct similarities in the construction of these plots can be seen. It is my argument that these similarities are the discernible features of
syntactic aspect of genre. In the next chapter similarities in the syntactic structure of plots will be discussed further with a focus on the romance genre.
Chapter 4: The Romance Genre

Pen Friends

Helen didn’t know who deserved the majority of her wrath. She supposed she held Maddie responsible for the greater portion of the day’s upset. It had been Maddie’s idea to go to the book launch. They had arrived there with tickets provided by Maddie’s boss. And it was Maddie who had gone out of her way to ‘catch the attention’ of the romance writer, Chris Strong.

But, Helen thought, Strong was not without blame. If not for Strong, a man with smouldering good looks, abundant charm and mesmerising dark grey eyes, Helen knew she wouldn’t be in this situation.

She folded her arms and exhaled through her nostrils. The sound came out like a snake’s hiss. She glowered sullenly at the walls of the interview room.

Detective Sergeant McDonald placed the pen on the desk in front of Helen. The pen was a gold coloured metal, inscribed with designs to suggest the cogs and gears of a watch’s internal mechanisms. The cap was set with sparkling clear gemstones that she thought looked like diamonds. There was a fingerprint smudge of ink near the nib. It was, Helen decided, quite obviously the pen of a successful writer. She didn’t think a person needed to be a Detective Sergeant to work out that much. Prudently, she kept that thought to herself.

McDonald pressed the record button on the machine between them and then settled himself back in the interview room chair. He studied her with one eyebrow raised.

“I’ll ask the question again.” His voice had the weariness of a man bored by needless repetition. “Is this your pen, Ms Summers?”
Helen tried not to let her irritation show. Detective Sergeant McDonald already knew the answer to the question. She had given her response several times and couldn’t imagine why he thought she would change her mind now their conversation was being recorded. She pursed her lips into silence and shook her head.

It wasn’t her pen.

She had told him as much several times.

“Very well,” McDonald said stiffly. “We’ve established that the pen is not your property. Would you care to explain how this pen ended up in your possession?”

“It’s a long story.”

He glanced at the clock above the interview room’s doorway. Gesturing at the tape recorder he said, “I have time to listen to a long story.”

Helen sighed. Reluctantly she tried to decide where to begin.

* *

In real life, Chris Strong was more striking than Helen had expected. He stood in front of the hotel’s crowded auditorium, as he read a short passage from his latest novel, *Pen Friends*. His voice had a melodic intonation. He spoke softly but at a volume that carried easily over the hushed crowd at the launch. Everyone, with the possible exception of Strong’s pretty young agent on the podium beside him, appeared mesmerised by his delivery. Once Strong had finished reading the passage, he closed the book to a round of tumultuous applause.

Graciously he bowed and then stepped away from the stage.
His agent raised her hands for everyone’s attention. She told the audience to help themselves to wine and chocolates and said Chris Strong would be reading again in half an hour. A bustle of excited chatter filled the room as people eased themselves from their seats and started toward the refreshments at the rear of the room.

Helen had seen Strong’s handsome face on the back of every hardback novel he’d ever published. She’d become familiar with the kindly smile and the comfortable crease of crow’s feet around his dark, smouldering eyes. She’d watched him in interviews on TV and in YouTube clips where he talked easily about the fantasy lovers he created in his bestselling stories. He was a confident man who appeared conservative and measured in his gestures. But, she had thought, save for his ability to write a good story, he was fairly unremarkable.

And yet, in the flesh, he seemed taller, broader and completely irresistible.

After hearing him read the opening pages of *Pen Friends*, Helen was looking forward to hearing him read more later in the evening. She hoped there would be a Q&A session so she could act like a doe-eyed fangirl and tell him how much she loved his work. She hoped there was a chance that he might appear beside her and-

“You were right,” Maddie whispered in Helen’s ear. Her words cut through Helen’s thoughts. “He really is gorgeous.”

To Helen’s dismay, Maddie reached for the throat of her blouse and snapped open the first three buttons. She tugged at the open collar to reveal an inviting glimpse of décolletage.

“What the hell are you doing?” Helen whispered urgently.

“I’m trying to catch his attention.”
“You’ll catch pneumonia if you uncover much more of your boobs.”

Maddie laughed. “There are times you sound just like my granny.”

Helen scowled and said nothing. She thought of opening buttons on her own blouse but she knew that would only make it look as though she was competing with Maddie. And, given her best friend’s generous proportions, Helen knew that was a competition she could never hope to win.

The turnout for Chris Strong’s book launch had been larger than she expected. Although she was an avid reader of his novels, Helen was only there because Maddie’s boss had apparently won a pair of tickets on a radio quiz and given them to Maddie in a gesture of veiled generosity.

Maddie worked as an agent for an insurance investigator. In exchange for the tickets her employer expected Maddie to deal with some aspect of a regional investigation whilst she was in that part of the city. Helen hadn’t bothered listening to the details about the investigation even though Maddie had tried sharing them on the car journey to the book launch. It was enough to know that her best friend had invited her to use the spare ticket so she could admire her favourite author at such close range.

Except, Helen could see that Chris Strong was unlikely to notice her now that her best friend was preparing to display her ample charms in an attempt to get his attention. She turned away so she didn’t have to watch as Maddie pushed an open hand into her bra to adjust herself.

Helen found herself facing Chris Strong. He was glancing uncertainly in Maddie’s direction. “Is your friend OK?” Strong asked.

Helen swallowed and tried not to let her excitement show. He was standing only inches from her. Strong was close enough so that she could catch the mouth-
watering tang of his cologne. Fragrances of a spicy murraya, freshened with oranges and marjoram, made him smell edible.

She shut that thought from her mind as her cheeks flushed.

“My friend’s fine,” Helen said. Thinking quickly of a way to excuse Maddie’s behaviour she added, “I think she was just a little warm.”

“These places get a little stuffy sometimes,” Strong admitted, glancing around the auditorium. “It’s especially common when they’re this busy.”

She nodded agreement. “I enjoyed the pages you read from Pen Friends.”

She gestured with the copy of the hardback she’d bought. It was new enough to still have the discounted price sticker on the front cover. Whilst listening to him read, Helen had worried that she might appear over-enthusiastic and besotted if she ever got a chance to talk with Strong. But, now, in his presence, she could hear herself babbling and she had no intention of trying to stop.

“I loved what you read,” she told him. “And I’m hoping this book will be as good as Lovelorn.”

“You liked Lovelorn?”

She shook her head. “No. I didn’t like Lovelorn. I adored it. That’s the best story you’ve ever written.”

His smile shifted. Before, although his grin had seemed pleasant, even attractive, it had seemed like a professional and artificial grin. Now she could see that his smile had softened into something that was undoubtedly genuine. The creases around his eyes deepened. His teeth glinted. The shift in appearance made him maddeningly more attractive.
“Lovelorn is my favourite title,” he admitted. “My editor always liked that one. The critics ignored it. My agent says it’s still way behind my other titles in terms of sales. And no one is even interested in picking up the film option—”

“But the story is so powerful,” Helen broke in. “It’s a wonderful retelling of *Orpheus and Eurydice*.”

He chuckled agreement. “*Orpheus and Eurydice* with a happy ending.”

“And the final lines,” Helen went on. “Where Carlos rescues Eleanor from Hades…” Her voice trailed off and she shivered at the memory.

“*Come with me and let me take you somewhere safe,*” Strong quoted.

She nodded and grinned. “*And, with those words,* Helen said, “she would be happy to go with him anywhere."

They shared a smile.

Helen could feel her heartbeat quicken. Her mouth was momentarily too dry to speak. She stared at him and saw he was studying her with a delicious smile. It was a smile that she yearned to kiss.

He shook his head as though stopping himself from saying something foolish.

“You’re one of the prize winners from the radio competition, aren’t you?”

“How did you know that?”

“Seating arrangements.” Strong nodded to the front of the auditorium where he had been reading and said, “My agent is meticulous about seating arrangements. She has the press on the first three rows and competition winners on the two rows behind.”

Helen nodded.

“Do you think writers have groupies?” Maddie asked her.
From the corner of her eye Helen could see that Maddie had almost finished adjusting herself but remained oblivious to the fact that Strong was standing so close. Maddie finally turned and realised the author was talking with Helen. She still had one hand inside her bra but she pulled it out and offered it to him. She didn’t even seem ruffled that he had clearly heard her question about groupies.

“I love all your books, Mr Strong,” she said blithely. “I’ve read both of them. I’m your number one fan.”

As Chris Strong politely shook the offered fingers, Helen cringed from the embarrassment of Maddie’s behaviour. It wasn’t just the boob-warmed handshake. It wasn’t even the announcement that she’d read both Chris Strong’s titles when he had authored more than two dozen successful romance stories. She thought the most cringe-worthy point of Maddie’s declaration was her claim to be his number one fan. It sounded like the sort of declaration a serial killer might make.

“Would you sign my book?” Maddie pushed her copy of Pen Friends toward Strong, not allowing him an opportunity to decline.

“Of course.”

His smile had shifted again. It was once more the detached façade of a pleasant professional. He took the book from Maddie and opened it to the frontispiece. “Who should I make it out to?”

“Helen,” Maddie said. “And if you could put, ‘To Helen Summers, with all my love and best wishes and I think you’re really wonderful.’ Or something like that.” She chuckled and added, “You’re a writer. I’m sure you know what sort of things sound like pretty words.”
Helen had heard people claim that they wanted the ground to open up and swallow them whole. But she had never before understood what the phrase meant. Now, for the first time in her life, she knew that desire. She glanced at her embarrassing best friend, shook her head in bewildered silence, and took a small step backward.

Maddie took advantage of Helen’s movement. She pushed closer to Strong. The ample thrust of her freshly displayed cleavage was held millimetres from his face as he bent over the book.

His smile faltered briefly as though he was distracted. Then the polished grin returned with saccharin charm. He glanced at Maddie and Helen could see he was fixedly holding her gaze rather than lowering his eyes to the temptation of the offered boobage.

From inside his jacket pocket he produced a stylish pen. Helen caught a glimpse of gold metal, sparkling gem settings and a smudge of a fingerprint near the nib. And then he was starting to write inside.

Maddie pushed past Helen and glanced at the words being written there. “Can you put lots of kisses on the bottom?” she asked. She giggled and said, “I mean on the bottom of the page. I wasn’t asking you to put kisses on my bottom. Unless you want to plant kisses on my bottom.”

With her cheeks burning furiously, Helen stepped away from Strong and Maddie. She hurried away from the book launch without bothering to get her copy signed.

*
“I don’t understand,” Detective Sergeant McDonald broke in. “How could the pen end up in your possession if you left the book launch at that point?”

“I didn’t take his pen.”

“That’s where the pen went missing,” McDonald explained. “That’s the last time Strong claims to have seen the pen. His agent says it was taken by a woman called Helen.”

Helen closed her mouth abruptly.

“You’re called Helen,” McDonald remembered.

“I can understand why they made you a Detective Sergeant.”

His brow furrowed. “What happened after you left the book launch? Where did you go?”

“I’ve already told you this.”

“You haven’t told me how you got hold of this pen,” McDonald reminded her. “How did this pen get into your possession?”

Helen thought for a moment before responding. She wanted to answer the questions honestly but she didn’t want to say anything that could be used against her best friend. Regardless of what had happened, she knew she had to be careful how she shared the information with Detective Sergeant McDonald.

*

Maddie placed the book down on the bar in front of Helen.

Helen was sitting in the hotel bar and trying to console herself with a stiff scotch. Maddie had called earlier to find out where she was. The fact that it had taken Maddie two hours to make the telephone call made Helen wonder what her
friend had been doing in that time. She wondered if Maddie had been doing something with Chris Strong and then bustled that unwanted idea from her thoughts.

“He signed it for you,” Maddie said, pushing the book closer to Helen.

“No,” Helen grumbled. “He signed it for you and your cleavage.”

Maddie had the good grace to blush. “Look at what he’s written,” she insisted.

Grudgingly Helen opened the front cover of the book. Instead of reading the words on the frontispiece she was startled to find something else hidden inside the book.

“Whose is the pen?”

“Aren’t I a genius?” Maddie laughed.

“You’ve stolen his pen?”

“Technically,” Maddie said carefully, “you’re the one who’s stolen his pen. Police will look at the book launch’s CCTV footage and see you’re standing next to Strong when he signs that book.”

Helen glared at her in disbelief.

“And,” Maddie went on, “if they interview Strong, he’ll probably remember that the last person who asked him to sign their book was a woman who identified herself as Helen.”

Helen shook her head. She sipped at her scotch and whispered, “I don’t believe this.”

“You’re not seeing this as an opportunity,” Maddie observed.
“An opportunity for what? To develop a criminal record? To get my picture on wanted posters in the Post Office? Or to nurture the loathing and resentment of a writer I’ve long admired?”

“All of the above,” Maddie said tartly. “And one thing more.” She motioned for the bartender and ordered a mojito. She waited until the drink was in front of her before breaking the tense silence that had nestled between them. “You’re not seeing this as an opportunity to meet Chris Strong away from the book launch environment. You’re not seeing this as an opportunity to get him away from his agent. You’re not seeing this as a chance to properly get close and personal with him.”

Helen glanced at Maddie. She was annoyed that her friend’s words made sense. At the back of her mind Helen accepted that she had been in the bar long enough for any of Maddie’s arguments to make sense. But Helen was reluctant to acknowledge that her judgement was possibly impaired. And she certainly didn’t want to think badly about the best friend who had invited her to the book launch where she’d met Chris Strong.

“What are you suggesting?”

Maddie pointed at the pen. “Take that up to Strong’s room. Explain that your ditzy friend accidentally ran off with it in the book. Tell him you’ve taken it upon yourself to return it.”

Helen considered this for a moment. The idea was certainly appealing. She could remember the sweet, edible scent of Strong’s cologne. Helen caught herself licking her lips as she tasted the memory.

“Of course,” Maddie went on, “I think you might be wasting your time. I think the pen’s got too many diamonds on it to be the property of a straight man. He’s
clearly shown no interest in my cleavage. I got the impression he had no interest in that sexy agent who was alongside him at the launch. So, I think he might be gay.” She shook her head and added, “But I’m not the one who was telling him how much she enjoyed reading *Lovelorn*.”

Helen frowned as she picked up the pen and studied its markings. She had thought Maddie was too distracted with the task of adjusting her wardrobe to overhear that exchange. She tried to remember why she had thought such a thing. Had Maddie been pretending to be oblivious to Chris Strong? Or had her friend been plotting something?

“If he does have an interest in you,” Maddie went on. “It’s likely he will show his gratitude by inviting you to join him for a meal. You can then hand over the pen and spend the evening chatting with him over steaks and fine wine as you tell him how good his books are. You might even take things further and give him-”

“I don’t know which hotel he’s staying at.”

“He’s staying here tonight.” Maddie offered a disarming grin and added, “I checked with the launch organisers.”

Helen studied the pen. She took a deep breath and came to a sudden decision. “OK,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

Not giving herself a moment to think she marched to the reception desk and explained the situation. She admitted that she had Mr Strong’s pen. She didn’t want to hand it over to the receptionist. She wanted to return it to him personally and apologise for the misunderstanding. The receptionist had called up to Strong’s room and Helen had been told she could visit his suite.

Two minutes later she stood anxiously outside the penthouse suite’s door.
Her heartbeat raced. Her head throbbed. She tried not to squeal when the door opened. Instead of seeing Chris Strong she stood facing a petite, stern-faced young woman. It was Strong’s agent.

At first words refused to come.

Eventually she stammered that she was returning a pen.

The pen.

Strong’s pen. She plucked the pen from her pocket and pushed it into the agent’s hand as she babbled through the explanation of how her ditzy friend had accidentally taken it after Strong had signed her book.

The agent glanced at the pen and then dragged Helen roughly into the suite. “This is a fake,” she said locking the door of the hotel room. “Mr Strong’s pen was an original Caran D’Ache. Is this some sort of con that you and your friend are trying to pull?”

Helen shook her head and struggled to find the words to deny that she was involved in any sort of con.

The agent sniffed. She stood with her back to the hotel room door and a mobile phone in her hand. “Don’t bother with any more of your lies,” she warned. “I’m calling the police. You can tell them all about your scheme when you’re down at the station.”

*  

“Is that your story?” Detective Sergeant McDonald prompted. “You ‘accidentally’ took the pen after Strong had signed your book.” He made air quotes
with his fingers as he said the word *accidentally*. “And now you’re claiming that you visited his hotel room to give him this replica?”

With the final word McDonald stabbed his finger at the pen in front of Helen. Helen tried to think. Was it possible that the pen was really a forgery? Did Chris Strong know he was signing his books with a forged pen? Was it possible that Maddie was involved in the deception?

“I’ve told you everything that happened.” She stopped herself from sobbing. Tears would only make her look guilty. “And I don’t know why you’re saying this is a replica. It looks like exactly the same pen Strong had when he signed Maddie’s book. I even recognise the smudge of a fingerprint near the nib.”

“If this is the best story you can come up with,” McDonald sighed. “If you won’t tell me how you really came to be in possession of this replica pen, I’ll have to have you charged with-.”

There was a knock on the interview room door.

McDonald frowned and went over to see who was interrupting them. In the brief moment that the door was open, Helen could see that Maddie stood there. She looked solemn and surprisingly demure now that she had refastened the buttons on her blouse and donned her suit’s jacket. She looked, Helen thought, every inch the professional insurance investigator.

By Maddie’s side, looking equally formidable, stood Chris Strong.

Helen couldn’t hear what was being said but she could see Detective Sergeant McDonald blushing and shaking his head.

“This is an unorthodox development,” he blustered.

“Entirely my fault,” Strong said. “But, if you could release Ms Summers, I’ll explain the error and try to make amends.”
Helen glanced at the doorway. Maddie gave her a sly wink and mouthed the words, “It’s going to be OK.”

*

She sat in the bar with Chris Strong. Although he had ordered a bottle of wine for them to share their drinks remained untouched. Once again he was wearing his genuine smile and she felt as though she could endure his affable company forever.

“I’m indebted to your friend Maddie,” Strong explained. “She works for the insurance investigators I’d employed to check on my agent.”

“Your agent?”

“There’ve been some anomalies with my accounts,” Strong admitted. “One or two of my personal possessions had gone missing. Not much. But they were valuable items and I became suspicious. Then, when I thought my pen felt heavier than it should—”

“You know the weight of your pen?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know how much it weighs. But I’m a writer. It’s the pen I use every day for my notes. I’m not oblivious to details.”

She nodded. It made sense.

“I suspected my pen had been replaced by a replica. I wanted to have a jeweller look at it but I couldn’t go to one without arousing my agent’s suspicions. That’s why I asked Maddie’s company to get involved. She organised the ruse where she pretended to walk away with it after I’d signed her book.”
Now it made sense. Helen nodded, sipped her wine and said, “So, once Maddie had the pen, she took it to be valued.”

“The valuation confirmed that it’s a forgery,” Strong explained. “My agent had swapped my original with a forgery. She was trying to sell the real one online.”

“That’s very unscrupulous,” Helen mumbled.

Strong shrugged. “Unscrupulous is usually a good quality in an agent. But I’ve let her go.” Strong explained. “Detective Sergeant McDonald is currently interviewing her about some of the other items that have gone missing from my apartment. I’ve told Maddie’s bosses that she did a superb job of addressing my situation. Her boss asked her to head back to her office this evening to file a report. The only thing I have to do now is find a way to compensate you for getting entangled with this tawdry little melodrama.”

Helen liked the way he used the word ‘tawdry’. She sipped at her glass of wine to hide her smile.

“What can I do to make this up to you?” he coaxed.

She glanced down just as her stomach growled. For the first time that day she realised she had barely had a chance to eat. The idea of sharing a meal with her favourite author suddenly seemed like the most wonderful way to spend an evening and she asked if he knew of a good restaurant nearby.

He stood up and gestured for her to take his hand.

“Come with me,” he said, “and let me take you somewhere safe.”

Her grin turned into a beam. He had used the line she remembered from *Lovelorn*. And, with those words, Helen knew, she would be happy to go with him anywhere.

THE END
Analysis of the Romance Genre and its Associated Plot

The table below shows the syntactic structure of a short romantic fiction plot, as well as the content of ‘Pen Friends’, with both narratives broken down to give a description of their categories of action, reaction and consequences. It will be demonstrated during the subsequent discussion that the plot of ‘Pen Friends’ contains the typical attributes of the syntactic aspect of the plot most commonly associated with the supergenre that is romantic fiction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romance</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B.</td>
<td>Character A and Entity B encounter various obstacles that threaten to impede their relationship.</td>
<td>Character A and Entity B achieve a satisfactory resolution.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Pen Friends’</td>
<td>Helen is introduced to Chris.</td>
<td>Helen and Chris are unable to properly converse because of various obstacles.</td>
<td>Helen and Chris conclude the story looking as though they could begin a romantic relationship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As will have been noticed, the action stage of a romance plot is identical for the supergenre of romance and the previously discussed supergenre of horror: Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B. This point will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter (Chapter 5: Analysis of the Erotic Genre), where

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20 Within the romance genre, Entity B is the principal romantic interest of Character A.

21 Technically, the first scene in ‘Pen Friends’ shows Helen in conversation with Detective Sergeant McDonald. This initial scene is used here as part of a non-linear framing device, which means it is also possible to interpret this presentation of semantic features, such as an interrogation room, an investigating officer and discussion of stolen property, as indicating that the story belongs to the mystery genre. However, whilst the framing narration does demonstrate the key features of the mystery supergenre, which will be discussed in Chapter 6: The Mystery Genre, the framed narrative follows the structure of a typical romance story.

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it will be shown that the action stage for the supergenre of erotic fiction is also identical. Further, it will be argued that these three supergenres share a similarity in the construction of their openings because they focus on character relationships rather than situation or plot. For the moment, it is enough to acknowledge that, in the action stage of ‘Pen Friends’, Helen (Character A) is brought into conflict with Chris (Entity B). The conflict within a romance plot, as has been previously mentioned, comes from the contrast between Character A’s desire for unification with Entity B and the threat of irreconcilable separation. In ‘Pen Friends’, the introduction of these two characters - two characters whose conflict of separation and unification constitutes the core content of the narrative - occurs within the opening paragraph:

Helen didn’t know who deserved the majority of her wrath. She supposed she held Maddie responsible for the greater portion of the day’s upset. It had been Maddie’s idea to go to the book launch. They had arrived there with tickets provided by Maddie’s boss. And it was Maddie who had gone out of her way to ‘catch the attention’ of the romance writer, Chris Strong.

Before exploring the features of the romance plot’s action stage in greater depth, it is prudent to discuss inspiration. The idea for this piece was conceived from the simple goal of trying to write a stereotypically heteronormative ‘Boy Meets Girl’ story, eschewing my usual considerations of researching audience and market as mentioned earlier (Chapter 3: Analysis of the Horror Genre and its Associated Plot). Because I was writing a story that focused on the developing relationship between two characters, I wanted to make sure that both characters were mentioned very early in the story. The romance writer, Jenny Kane, explains that this focus on establishing character relationships is common, if not essential, to romance writing:
[t]he very premise of the romantic story is to get characters A and B together so that the initial spark between them can be ignited - via friendship, hate, lust, mutual interest, mutual friends etc, and then take them through a series of 'incidents' until the magic wand can be waved at the end and they live happily ever after - or not. (Kane, 2015)

As a result of this focus on relationships we can see the action stage of the romance plot follows this same, somewhat predictable format. It is the start of a romantic story, therefore both invested parties are immediately presented to the reader with Character A being brought into conflict with Entity B.

As a writer unused to the conventions of the romance genre, my initial concern with the creation of the story was to make sure the opening passage properly introduced readers to the romance's central characters. It was this opening passage that I needed to write before I could properly continue. Interestingly, Kane explained that, for her, the process of creativity was invariably prompted by a suitable title:

My initial ideas always come from the emergence of a title. I'll just suddenly know that the title which has randomly popped into my head needs to become a story. Usually, within minutes of this title making itself known in my head, the story will begin to form, and I'll scribble it down. (Kane, 2015)

Whilst I can relate to Kane's investment in the correct title, after reflecting on the stories written to illustrate this thesis, I suspect my personal inspiration is closer to Ernest Hemingway's advice from *A Moveable Feast*: ‘All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know’ (1964: 12). For me, it appears that this true sentence usually extends to include the production of a correct opening passage, that is, one that suitably exemplifies the story's action
stage. On this point, it is also worth taking into account Teresa M. Amabile’s thoughts on what she calls the componential theory of creativity, where she says that,

creativity requires a confluence of all components; creativity should be highest when an intrinsically motivated person with high domain expertise and high skill in creative thinking works in an environment high in supports for creativity. (Amabile, 2012: 3)

As a writer, I feel motivated to undertake the task of writing because I do find the process interesting and satisfying. Modesty prevents me from claiming to have the ‘high domain expertise’ that Amabile mentions. However, it is acknowledged that I have a publishing history that includes more than fifty full-length titles and a substantial amount of short fiction so, even if I am reluctant to suggest I have ‘high domain expertise’, I could at least argue that I have substantial domain experience which was likely borne from some ‘skill in creative thinking’. In addition to all this, because I work with several communities of writers, as a lecturer, as an occasional performance poet and as a practising writer, I feel it is accurate to say that I inhabit environments that support creativity. However, whilst I do think Amabile’s observations are relevant to any discussion on creativity, it is also worth acknowledging author Todd Lubart’s comments when he says:

there is probably no single ‘creative process’ that one can follow like a recipe to be sure to produce a creative product. Indeed, probably a multitude of paths can lead to a creative product (and an even greater number of paths can lead to a noncreative production). It may be possible, however, to identify the optimal process for a specific person to generate creative work given that individual’s background and cognitive and personality profile, and taking into account that person’s environment. (Lubart, 2009: 161)
Thus, whilst it is appreciated that my approach of finding the correct opening passage worked for me on this occasion, it is accepted that this method is only one possible creative avenue. However, whilst there is no guarantee that the results can always be replicated, it is worth pointing out that this approach has been fruitful for all the fiction I have written for this thesis.

Returning to the romance plot, and moving onto the reaction stage, it is expected that Character A and Entity B will try to overcome those barriers that threaten to impede the developing relationship. Fiction writer Martha Alderson says:

_Whatever their form, all stories at their core follow the same basic pattern as does nature. Life is born, expands, and then contracts and closes, only to begin again. In the same way the energy of all stories ebbs and flows along the way._ (2011: 26)

This core, this expansion and contraction, echoes the reaction stage of short romantic fiction. A couple come together in the action stage, they ebb and flow as the narrative develops through the reaction stage, coming together and then being driven apart as the conflict offers promises of unification and threats of separation, and then the consequences stage (usually) unites them.

Leigh Michaels, author of more than 80 full length romance titles, discussing the reaction stage in romantic novels, says:

_In order to keep the readers’ attention through the long midsection of the book, you’ll need to continue to develop the conflict and advance the plot in logical steps without making the story predictable. What keeps the readers turning pages is suspense, which you can create using a variety of techniques, including tension, pacing, and foreshadowing._ (Michaels, 2007: 107)
This focus on suspense, tension and pacing is judicious advice that can be applied to the reaction stage of all fiction and not just romance plots. In ‘Pen Friends’ the narrative builds suspense as Helen relates her story about casually meeting Chris Strong. Obstacles occur at first with Helen’s shyness, and then her embarrassment at Maddie’s forwardness, and finally with Helen’s arrest. Obviously, different writers tackle the reaction stage in their own distinctive styles, and it is this difference of approach that gives each story its individuality of expression as it moves toward the consequences. However, as it will be shown later in this chapter, it is a consistent feature of the romance genre that this aspect of the plot’s reaction stage invariably shows characters encountering obstacles and then surmounting them in their bid to develop a relationship, as though this were an essential component of the romantic genre.

After describing his rationale for the unconventional conclusion to his novel *Changing Places* (1975), David Lodge discusses reader expectations with regards to story endings:

> In fact, so strong – atavistically strong – is the human desire for certainty, resolution and closure, that not all readers were satisfied by this ending, and some have complained to me that they felt cheated by it. But it satisfied me. (Lodge, 1992: 228-229)

This is mentioned here as a reminder that readers appear to be more invested in the conventional conclusion to a story than in any other aspect of fiction. With the romance story, and particularly with *short* contemporary romantic fiction, the focus is usually on a positive satisfactory conclusion.\(^{22}\) Discussing the conclusion of the

\(^{22}\) Character A and Entity B achieve a satisfactory resolution.
prototypical love story, Ronald B. Tobias notes: ‘The final effect […] is the reunion of the lovers and a resumption of the emotional intensity of the first phase’ (1999: 180). Tobias makes no allowance for an unsatisfactory conclusion to a romance, and with good reason. A vocal majority of readers, writers and publishers of romantic fiction favour a Happily Ever After (HEA) conclusion. Laurie Gold (1996), author of the website All About Romance, regularly polls romance readers to answer the question: ‘Must a romance have a HEA ending?’ Many of the responses she publishes express a distinct preference for a HEA conclusion. Comments include those from romance reader and author, Deborah Simmons: ‘To me, a happy ending is part of the appeal of romance. I don’t know if I would read a romance without it, and I doubt if I would write one, either’ (2007, cited in Gold, 2007: n.p.). Similar opinions are voiced by readers such as Judith Czako who says, ‘if it’s not HEA, it’s not a romance’ (2007, cited in Gold, 2007: n.p.). Author Amanda Ashley adds:

I don’t know about other publishers, but my editor […] has always insisted on a happy ever after ending. I tried to write one where the hero left the heroine at the end of the book because he knew he was wrong for her, but my editor insisted I change it’. (2007, cited in Gold, 2007: n.p.)

Author Anne Marble appears to be speaking on behalf of the majority of romance readers when she observes:

Genre expectations are a vital part of any genre. When I read a mystery, I expect the mystery to be solved. Period. If it's not solved, it's not a mystery, and I wonder what’s the point of reading it. In romance, the HEA is part of the expectation of the genre. Fans read romance novels expecting that no matter what troubles are thrown at the hero and heroine, things will work out at the end, and the couple will end up together. (Marble, 2007: n.p.)

23 www.likesbooks.com
The submission guidelines for Crimson Romance explicitly say: ‘Romances, by nature, must be between consenting adults and have a happily-ever-after or at least happy-for-now ending’ (2015: n.p.). Similarly, the submission guidelines for Roane Publishing state: ‘The primary relationship in the book should offer an emotionally satisfying happily ever after (HEA) or happily for now (HFN) ending’ (2015: n.p.). In a similar vein, Entangled Brazen explains: ‘If you like your heroes hot, the sex hotter, and a swoon-worthy romance to swoop in and save your happily ever after, Brazen has the story for you’ (2015: n.p.). To that end, following the pattern of a typical romance story, the concluding lines from ‘Pen Friends’ continue the trend of a HEA (or, at least, a HFN) conclusion:

He stood up and gestured for her to take his hand.
‘Come with me,’ he said, ‘and let me take you somewhere safe.’
Her grin turned into a beam. He had used the line she remembered from *Lovelorn*. And, with those words, Helen knew, she would be happy to go with him anywhere.

At this point in the story Chris and Helen have the opportunity to be together and the obstacles that had previously impeded their relationship have been removed.

Before looking at how this plot compares with other romances, it might be prudent to consider the question: what about romance stories that do not have a HEA or HFN conclusion? For example, in ‘The Blue Film’ (Greene, 1997), after his wife finds footage of him in a pornographic movie, the story concludes with a husband realising he does not love his wife, and perhaps had only ever loved the prostitute with whom he co-starred in the film. In ‘The Legacy’ (Woolf, 1997), Gilbert Clarendon discovers his beloved wife’s death was a suicide, deliberately executed so she could be reunited with the dead man whom she really loved. In ‘Spring in...
Fialta’ (Nabokov, 1958/2014) the unnamed narrator spends fifteen years hankering for the elusive Nina before she is killed in a car accident at the story’s conclusion. Each of these stories has love as a central theme and none has a HEA or HFN. If anything, the stories share a grim, nihilistic bleakness that seems to suggest that happiness and love are mutually exclusive states. One possible reason for this absence of happiness could be because, whilst each of these stories has love as a central semantic element, syntactically, none of the stories is structured as a romance. Syntactically, ‘The Blue Film’ is an erotic story, with the focus on a content that shows a couple sharing pornography, and discovering instances of perceived adultery and cuckqueanry that trigger a conflict between notions of propriety and impropriety.24 The love (or its absence) between the couple is important to the narrative. However, this presence of love as a theme does not make the plot a romance. Syntactically, ‘The Legacy’ follows the structure of a mystery plot: revealing a puzzle, providing clues that suggest an answer to the puzzle, and then supplying a solution.25 Again, love is a key theme, but this does not make the plot a romance: the conflict comes from Gilbert trying to find information to overcome his ignorance. In ‘Spring in Fialta’, if we consider the notion of the narrator’s life without Nina to be something unpleasant or undesired, it is easy to perceive the plot as being identical to a horror story with conflict coming from the juxtaposition between fear and safety. Once again, love is a central theme, but that does not mean that any story focusing on love should be described as a romance.

24 The structure of the typical erotic fiction plot will be discussed in the next section of this thesis (Chapter 5: Analysis of the Erotic Genre).
25 The structure of the typical mystery plot will be more closely examined later in this thesis (Chapter 6: Analysis of the Mystery Genre and Chapter 7: Analysis of the Whodunit).
Of course, this is not to suggest that all romance stories have a HEA or HFN conclusion. This point is illustrated by the following examples, which exhibit the structure of the prototypical romance plot. Specifically, the stories being considered are Anton Chekhov’s ‘The Helpmate’, O. Henry’s ‘Lickpenny Lover’ and Kate Hewitt’s ‘The Meaning of Things’. These stories are disparate in authorship, geography, history and content, yet each complies with the consistent pattern of action, reaction and consequences as described at the beginning of this chapter. It is possible to argue that, in a story like ‘Lickpenny Lover’, the resolution is not satisfactory for the characters. Masie rejects Carter’s proposal because she misunderstands his invitation for her to honeymoon with him in exotic, faraway lands, believing he wants to take her to the less glamorous location of Coney Island. However, the story is satisfactory from the perspective of the reader. This is a typical example of O. Henry’s humour, dependent on a narrative twist for the conclusion and allowing the central character to be undone by the shortcomings of predominantly demonstrated characteristics. It is also satisfactory in that the reader knows the relationship between these characters is not going to progress any further, having reached its logical conclusion.

26 Action: Nikolay Yevgrafitch, a doctor, decides to confront his wife, Olga, about her infidelities. Reaction: Olga wants to talk about something else and Nikolay has to promise her a payment of 25 roubles if she will hear him out. He asks for a divorce. Consequences: Olga says she doesn’t want a divorce, but she asks him for the 25 roubles he promised.


28 Action: Lily is married to Geoff but she realises that Matthew is watching her. Reaction: Lily’s interest in Matthew increases as her desire for Geoff decreases. Consequences: Lily sees Matthew’s wife is looking lustfully at Geoff and realises she should be content with her existing relationship.
The short romantic story begins with Character A being brought into conflict with Entity B, and then goes on to follow a pattern where Character A and Entity B encounter various obstacles that threaten to impede their relationship. These obstacles can be presented in a variety of guises. In ‘Now Showing’, the obstacles include a past history between the couple, conspiracy theories and the hero’s apparent arrest for his involvement in a juvenile prank (Willis, 2014). In ‘How the Widow Won the Deacon’, the obstacles include local gossips and Entity B’s desire to triumph over a squire in a horse race (W. J. Lampton, 2015). In ‘100 Ways to Love’, the principal obstacle is Tess’s insecurity but there are also other issues: the character’s desire to diet, her yearning to find an appropriate dress and her need to summon the courage to go to a dance with Tony (V. Savage, 2012).

Obviously, this list is not an exhaustive inventory of obstacles that can be found in short romantic fiction; this is just a small selection of examples that show some of the range of obstacles that can impede the prospect of a relationship between Character A and Entity B.

The obstacles encountered in a romance story do not have to be overcome in the consequences stage – only addressed or acknowledged in a way that can be deemed satisfactory. In Chekhov’s ‘The Helpmate’, Nikolay Yevgrafitch never gets to properly confront Olga about her infidelities or discuss the issues of trust her behaviour has caused within their relationship. Nevertheless, the fact that Yevgrafitch does accept his wife’s shortcomings is shown in this line from the final section of the story:

And once more he asked himself in perplexity how he, the son of a village priest, with his democratic bringing up -- a plain, blunt, straightforward man -- could have so helplessly surrendered to the
power of this worthless, false, vulgar, petty creature, whose nature was so utterly alien to him. (Chekhov, 1899/2014)

As mentioned before, the romance story (usually) concludes with a successful resolution. At the end of ‘Tiramisu for Two’, the conservative widow, Mary, finally decides to try something outside the familiarity of her usual experience and she samples a comparatively exotic dessert (Edmunds, 2015). Throughout the story Mary has been continuing in the set ways that had been part of her previous marriage, much to the annoyance of Ken, a potential suitor. In the final line, where she pitches a question between Ken and the waiter, ‘Tiramisu for two?’ (Edmunds, 2015: 9), the reader is shown that Mary has started making the effort to build a new relationship. This is a satisfactory resolution to the story because Mary and Ken are shown to be on the verge of developing a relationship that is based on an acceptance of each other’s interests.

In ‘The May Ball’, Jenny believes she has spoilt the chance to have a relationship with Jim. However, in the final scene of the story, Jim dismisses her earlier hesitancy and invites her to be his partner at the May Ball. With this example, the consequences stage of the story suggests a resolution that is satisfactory for the central characters: ‘Suddenly life seemed a whole lot brighter’ (Clark, 2015).

Similarly, the consequences stage of ‘Remembering Rupert’ shows Character A on the brink of forging a relationship with James, Entity B, as illustrated by these final lines:

One thing I was sure of was that the Rupert and Dolly of our childhoods would always remain in our hearts and James and I still had a lot of catching up to do. Today had been a new beginning and I knew, deep
down, that there would be many more next times for all of us. (Inman, 2015: 7)

This is not to suggest that the satisfactory resolution is always a HEA or HFN conclusion; although, as has been stated before, that does seem to be the ending that contemporary editors prefer. By way of contrast, it is a little more difficult to see the satisfactory resolution in a story like Chekov’s ‘The Darling’ (1899/2014), where Olga Semyonovna (Character A) goes from one ill-fated relationship to another. She concludes the story as the guardian to a young boy and continues to display her peculiarly obsessive behaviour towards him. This is clearly not a satisfactory resolution for the character. But the reader, having witnessed the pattern of Olga creating her own obstacles in relationships, can find this an appropriate conclusion for the story. Similarly, in Chekhov’s ‘Polinka’, the title character endures a harrowing argument with her friend, Nikolay (1887/2014). Nikolay berates Polinka for harbouring a romantic interest in a man outside her social circle. Polinka ends the story miserable and confused – a conclusion that is not satisfactory for the characters but is satisfying for the reader who can see that Nikolay’s insults were borne from a combination of jealousy and romantic concern. Obviously there are other examples of romantic stories that do not conclude with a resolution that can typically be described as HEA or HFN. However, the romantic story will invariably conclude with an ending that can be perceived as satisfactory from one perspective or another. The fantasy and science-fiction author Jane Yolen said the inevitability of the happy ending depends ‘on whether you are Rumpelstiltskin or the Queen’ (1992: 106). In that light it can be seen that an unsatisfactory resolution for a story’s character(s) can still be considered a satisfactory conclusion for the reader.
All in all, this again indicates that there is a commonality of plot components, a repeated pattern of content in the action, reaction and consequences stages of the plot, that is common to the supergenre of romantic fiction. On that note, it will be useful to explore the subtle differences between the supergenre of romantic fiction and the supergenre of erotic fiction, as considered in the next chapter.
Chapter 5: The Erotic Genre

Victoria’s Hand

London, England, 1890

The parlour was quiet enough so Victoria could hear the tick of the Grandfather from the hall outside. Stark spring sunlight filtered through the net curtains to illuminate the elegant furnishings. The family’s finest bone china was laid out on a lily-white tablecloth. The afternoon tea was completed with freshly baked French fancies. Sitting comfortably in one of the parlour’s high-backed chairs, Victoria placed one lace-gloved hand over the other, adjusted her voluminous skirts, and stared down at Algernon as he knelt before her.

She knew what was coming.

She had anticipated this day for months.

Before he started to speak, she knew what he was going to say.

It was the first time they had ever been together without a chaperone. Unless he had come to the house with this specific purpose her parents would not have allowed her to spend any time alone with a suitor. The idea of her being alone with a man was simply too scandalous for civilized society to contemplate.

“Victoria, my dearest,” he began.

There was a tremor of doubt in his voice. Victoria liked that. It suggested he wasn’t entirely certain that she would say yes. His bushy moustache bristled with obvious apprehension. His Adam’s apple quivered nervously above his small, tied cravat. His large dark eyes stared up at her with blatant admiration. He looked as though his entire future happiness rested on her response to this single question.

She was dizzied by the rush of rising power.
“I’ve spoken to your father,” Algernon began. “I’ve discussed the matter with my own parents and employer. I’ve even gained tacit approval from the local bishop. But now comes the time for the most important response of all, my dearest. Victoria: I’ve come to ask for your hand.”

She smiled smugly to herself.

Outwardly her face remained an impassive mask.

“Algernon,” she murmured. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” he said quickly.

She allowed her lips to twist into a demure smile.

He fumbled in the pocket of his waistcoat and produced a small gilt-edged box. Almost dropping it in his haste he snapped the lid open and showed her a quaint ring that was encrusted with microscopically small semi-precious stones. She recognised it as one of the DEAREST rings that were currently enjoying popularity. The initial letter of each stone – a diamond, an emerald, an amethyst, a ruby, another emerald, a sapphire and a topaz – spelt out the word DEAREST. The eclectic collection of colours made Victoria think it looked more like a childish novelty than a genuine declaration of their betrothal.

“This is a mere token of our betrothal,” he gasped.

“Yes,” Victoria agreed. She made no attempt to take the offered jewellery. “It is a mere token. With the emphasis heavily on the word “mere,” I think.”

He blinked with surprise.

She could see it was time to test his mettle. Straightening her back, quietly deciding she liked having Algernon on his knees before her, Victoria said, “Do you want me to consider you as a potential husband?”

“I’d be honoured.”
“Then get your cock out. Let me see what I’d be getting.”

The words hung between them like a thrown gauntlet. The Grandfather in the hall outside continued to tick loudly. Algernon studied her face with an expression that was almost comical. “Victoria?” he whispered meekly. “I don’t think I heard you correctly. Could you please forgive me and say that again?”

“Get your cock out,” Victoria said flatly. “If I’m going to consider marrying you I want to make sure you’re carrying something more impressive than that crappy little ring you just offered me.”

His cheeks flushed bright pink.

She could feel the inner muscles of her sex clutching as she watched him squirm. His embarrassment and awkwardness were exhilarating to behold. Knowing she had inspired those responses made her moist along the line of her pussy lips. “If you want me as a wife I have every right to know what my husband will be bringing to the marital bedroom. Get your cock out and show me the goods, or I’ll have one of the servants escort you out of here now.”

Again he hesitated. It took all Victoria’s restraint not to rub her thighs together and gleefully enjoy his dilemma. Inside the tightly laced bodice of her corset her nipples were hard and aching. A wave of light-headedness came close to making her swoon in the high-backed chair where she waited.

“Unbutton your pants. Show me your cock. Or go away and tell your parents, your employer and the bishop that I’ve rejected your offer. The choice is yours, Algernon. But make it quickly. The tea is cooling.”

He began to fumble with the buttons at the front of his trousers.

The ring box fell to the floor and the gaudy jewellery dropped forgotten on the Oriental rug. Algernon’s face was the shade of flustered crimson that Victoria had
seen on the angered cheeks of drunks and brawlers. On his bookish face the colour was surprisingly fetching. She lowered her gaze as soon as he had exposed himself. The flaccid tube of his pink flesh hung innocuously from the front of his pants.

“It’s not very big, is it?” she sneered.

“It gets bigger,” he said defensively.

“Then make it bigger,” she snapped. “Because at the moment that appalling little engagement ring looks slightly more attractive.”

There was an instant where she thought he might refuse. If there was any point when he was likely to reject her authority, Victoria knew it would be this moment when she had insulted his gift and his manhood. To make sure he didn’t take advantage of the opportunity and go scurrying back to the sanctuary of his friends and family, she tugged the frills of her skirt up and dared to reveal a stocking-clad ankle.

“Make it big enough,” she coaxed, “and I might consider saying yes.”

He began to pull on himself.

His gaze was fixed on her ankles and his concentration appeared hard enough to etch wrought-iron. His hand moved quickly up and down the limp length of his cock and she watched the meagre tube of flesh thicken and grow. His fist was tight around the shaft, trapping blood into the dark and bulbous dome. As his hand continued to work she saw that his fist had to travel further each time to go from the base to the end.

“Stop masturbating,” she snapped.

He obeyed instantaneously.

She grinned at the eager way he had given himself to her control.
“It’s an adequate length,” she conceded. She hoped that her smile was not so wide that he realised she wanted him. If she was to accept his offer of marriage, this was a vital moment in their relationship. If she could make Algernon understand from this moment onward that she was the one in control he would be her malleable slave for the rest of their days together. “Do you know how to use that cock of yours?”

“I… I think I know wh… what to do with it,” he stammered.

“You may carry on handling yourself while we discuss my terms to accepting your offer,” she declared haughtily.

Automatically, Algernon’s hand went back to his cock. He stroked himself slowly and eventually managed to tear his gaze from her ankles so he could study her face. Victoria was certain he would be more easily controlled if he wasn’t studying her eyes and she inched her skirts higher. She was showing off her shins, and silently proud that she had elected to wear her sheerest stockings today. As she pulled the skirts higher, Algernon stroked himself more swiftly.

“Are you attached to that moustache?”

He floundered. “It grows from my face,” he said, sounding puzzled. “Is that what you meant?”

“No, Algernon.” She recited his name with the impatience of a disappointed schoolmistress. “You know perfectly well that’s not what I meant. I was asking if you would lose that moustache if it meant I would consent to being your wife.” She hitched her skirts higher. It was a daring poise that revealed her knees. Another few inches and he would be able to see the tops of her stockings and the alabaster flesh of her thighs.

“Don’t you like the look of my moustache?”
“It’s not the look that worries me,” Victoria purred. “I’m more concerned about the way it will feel when you lick my pussy.”

He held himself rigid.

She understood he was on the verge of climaxing and admired the restraint he showed in holding off his potential orgasm. His eyes were momentarily glazed. His mouth hung open as though he had almost pulled too hard and pushed himself beyond the brink of reasonable self-control. Delighted by his torment, Victoria lifted her skirts higher.

Algernon’s gaze fell to the tops of her stockings. She could see his eyes widen as he noted the pale flesh of her upper thighs. He licked his lips with appreciation when he saw the thatch of curls that covered her most intimate secrets.

Aside from selecting her finest hosiery for this appointment Victoria had elected to meet Algernon without donning any undergarments. It was a bold way for a young lady to deport herself but she understood her courage was reaping ample rewards. “Should we see how your moustache feels against me?” she suggested. “A young lady has a right to know about these things before making a commitment of this magnitude. Would you care to tongue my hole for a moment so I can decide whether or not you may keep your moustache?”

He nodded.

She sensed his excitement was so great he couldn’t properly articulate his desire to do as she had asked. Still stroking his length, and shuffling awkwardly forward on his knees, he lowered his face toward her sex.

Victoria held her breath as his tongue squirmed closer. A part of her wanted to judiciously concentrate on the pleasure he was able to bestow. She wanted to fairly gauge the sensation of having his prickly moustache so close to the tender
flesh of her sex. She was struggling hard to be the dominant member of their burgeoning relationship and wanted to behave in the manner she thought most befitting for an authoritative young lady.

But arousal constantly distracted her thoughts.

A soft tongue lapped at the outer lips of her sex.

She arched her back against the seat.

The warmth of Algernon’s breath proved maddeningly exciting. He teased the dewy lips of her cleft until she was almost dizzy with the need for climax. She could tell he was positioning himself carefully, trying not to brush her most sensitive skin with the abrasive tickle of his bushy moustache. Occasionally an errant hair scoured her flesh but it was a small distraction compared to the bliss of his tongue travelling over her pussy. Nevertheless, she could see the facial hair might eventually present a problem.

“My clit,” she insisted. “Tongue my clit.”

It was a test. If he understood what she meant, and went onto find her clitoris, she would consider taking him as her husband. If he pulled back and looked puzzled she would push him away and tell him he was unworthy.

Algernon’s tongue slipped to the top of her sex and stroked the pulsing bud of her arousal. The sensation was enough to make her groan. Victoria stuffed the back of her hand against her mouth to stifle a scream of delight. She pressed her shoulders back against the chair and thrust her pelvis sharply toward him. The urge for release had been strong before but now, as his tongue chased lazy circles against the throbbing bead of her clitoris, she realised she was only moments away from ecstasy. Knowing she had to show some restraint, determined that Algernon
would not reduce her to a quivering wreck of satisfaction, Victoria steeled herself against the pleasure and said, “Now tongue inside my hole.”

He was more obedient than she had dared to hope.

The tongue slid slowly from her clitoris and eased itself between her labia. The warmth was divine. The intimate penetration was so intense Victoria had to grip the arms of the chair to maintain her show of equanimity. His tongue slid deeper, transporting her to a plateau of unparalleled delight. And then she was cresting a cloud of satisfaction so strong that she couldn’t hold herself back. Her inner muscles went into a joy-inspired convulsion. The fluid heat of her sex grew so hot she was momentarily seared by its brilliance. The shock of pleasure was so strong she wanted to scream with jubilation.

With a magnificent show of control, Victoria remained composed throughout the climax. Muted tremors shook her body but she wouldn’t allow Algernon to see how strongly they affected her disposition. Pushing his face away she adjusted her skirts and easily regained her previous composure as she settled herself decorously in the parlour’s high-backed chair.

“That was pleasantly done,” she allowed. Glancing down at him, she saw his fist remained clutched around his thick length. The idea of having him thrust between her legs was suddenly so appealing it was almost overwhelming. He had teased her sex to a wet and wanton furnace and she could imagine him stoking those fires further as he rammed into her again and again. With an amazing show of self-discipline, Victoria pushed that thought from her mind and regarded him coolly. “Continue doing that while you admire me,” she declared. “And I will set out the terms and conditions that you need to meet before I consent to be your wife.”

He nodded eagerly. His hand slid slowly along his throbbing shaft.
“First,” she said. “If you want me to be your wife, you’ll provide me with a far better engagement ring than the piece of crap you offered before.”

He nodded and apologised.

She spoke over him. “Diamonds,” she explained. “Large ones are best. And I think they always sit more prettily in white gold. Second, and this is vital if you ever want to taste my pussy again: lose that bloody moustache.”

“Of course.” He started to tell her it would be shaved off before the end of the day but she was talking over him.

“Third, and this is most important of all, I want you to know that I’m in charge of our relationship. You may go to the races, and the gentlemen’s clubs. You may pursue your career as best befits a gentleman of our times. But when you get home, you will get down on your knees when I tell you and you’ll obey every instruction I give. Do you understand and accept that condition, Algernon?”

Victoria could see the hesitancy on his face. She watched his resistance flicker and die. She adjusted her voluminous skirts, giving him a brief flash of the sodden pussy lips he had just tasted, and knew he was won over by the sight.

“I understand and accept,” he panted. “You shall be in control of our relationship.”

Her smile was thin-lipped with satisfaction. She gestured for him to come closer and said, “Very well. You may leave shortly and go and tell your parents, your employer and the bishop that I have consented to be your wife.” Her gaze sparkled with mischievous intent as she reached for his length. Encircling his shaft with lace-gloved fingers, she said, “But before you go and do any of those things, didn’t you say you wanted my hand?”

THE END
Analysis of the Erotic Genre and its Associated Plot

The table below shows the syntactic structure of a short erotic fiction plot alongside the content of ‘Victoria’s Hand’, with both broken down to give a description of their categories of action, reaction and consequences. It will be demonstrated during the following discussion that the plot of ‘Victoria’s Hand’ contains the typical attributes of the syntactic structure of the plot most commonly associated with the supergenre that is erotic fiction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Erotica</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria’s Hand</td>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B.</td>
<td>Character A becomes intimate with Entity B.</td>
<td>The conflict between Character A and Entity B reaches a partially resolved conclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria’s Hand</td>
<td>Victoria prepares to hear Algernon’s proposal.</td>
<td>Victoria becomes intimate with Algernon – but on unconventional terms for the time period.</td>
<td>The relationship looks set to continue in an unconventional fashion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given that contemporary western society usually perceives physical intimacy to be the natural progression of a romantic relationship, it could be expected that the prototypical erotic story would share a similar structure with the romance story and would be presented here as a subgenre. Indeed, this was certainly my expectation as I approached this chapter. However, from the examples that will be considered in the following pages, it will be seen that the structure of a typical erotic plot,

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29 Within the erotic genre, Entity B is the principal sexual interest of Character A. This sexual interest is not limited to a specific, conventionally compatible heteronormative individual. Entity B can describe single or multiple partners of any gender. Entity B can be realistic, fantastical, imaginary or even inanimate.
certainly in the execution of the action and consequences stages, is more closely related to the prototypical horror plot than it is related to the romantic plot. Whilst these similarities between the erotic and horror plots are inarguable, I intend to argue that the erotic plot is sufficiently different from either the horror plot or the romantic plot in order to be discussed on its own merits as an example of a supergenre.

It is also worth mentioning again that, with this plot, the focus of the conflict centres on the contrast between the binary opposition of propriety and impropriety. That is, whereas the conflict of the horror plot focuses on the contrast between fear and safety, and the conflict of the romance plot focuses on the contrast between separation and unification, the erotic plot is more concerned with the balance between societally accepted levels of decency and Character A’s desired levels of indecency. In this light it can be seen that the erotic plot is substantially different from either the horror plot or the romantic plot.

Before looking at the overall structure of the supergenre of erotic fiction, it is opportune to note that this is the third iteration of an action stage where Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B. Superficially, this construction of the action stage is the same as previously mentioned for plots that represent the supergenres of horror and romance. Although the content of the action stage differs for the mystery plot and the adventure plot, as will be discussed later, it is worth briefly focusing on this repetition within the action stage of these three genres in order to consider some of the ways in which they differ, aside from some of their similarities.
Obviously, a key difference is the identity of Entity B, which has been defined, so far, as the embodiment of unnatural behaviours in the horror plot, a love interest in the romance plot, and now a principal sexual interest in the erotic plot. This is not to suggest that the identity of Entity B can be used solely as an indicator of the genre. If Entity B is a vampire, for example, the story could still transpire to be horror, romance, or a piece of erotic fiction. In this example, the deciding factor of the genre would be Character A’s relationship with the vampire. Is Character A unsettled, or romantically interested or even aroused by the vampire? The main focus of this relationship between Character A and Entity B will dictate the genre of the story in syntactic terms. Similarly, if Entity B is a desirable millionaire, the deciding factor of the genre, at least on a syntactic level, will come through Entity B’s interaction with Character A: do the characters fight, form a mutually supportive relationship, or do they simply fornicate? Because this is the action stage of the plot being discussed, it is understandable that there are similarities across a range of genres. Characters and conflicts need to be introduced and set up early for fiction to be effective, and the establishment of these conventions is a constant regardless of genre. However, there is likely to be a reason why horror, romance and erotica share a similar structure in their openings: these three genres predominantly focus on characters interacting with other characters, rather than characters interacting with plot.

To expand on this point briefly, it will be noted that Ronald B. Tobias, after giving an overview of *Inferno*\(^{30}\), suggests that Dante categorised sins as belonging to one of two types: *forza* or *forda*, which Tobias helpfully translates as sins of *force* or

\(^{30}\) Dante's *Inferno*, not Dan Brown's *Inferno*. 
sins of fraud (1993: 32). Tobias uses this binary way of describing sins as a way to consider plot, supported by the following explanation:

Dante understood human character. These two sins come from two basic functions of human beings. Force is power, strength, physicality. Fraud comes from wit, cleverness, mentality. The Body and The Mind. If we look at plots, then, we should divide them into these two categories: plots of the body, and plots of the mind. (1993: 32-33)

This is an appealing approach when considering the narratives under discussion. The distinction works in this context if we consider Entity B in the horror, romance and erotic genres to be a reflection of Tobias’s idea about plots of the body. The essence of these plots, in the action stage at least, is that Character A will interact with Entity B. Within each of these aforementioned genres, Entity B usually takes the form of another character and the narrative follows the entanglement of that character in connection with Character A. Conversely, whilst the mystery plot and adventure plot both include other characters with whom Character A interacts, they are transformed into mysteries and adventures respectively because these narratives are more closely related to Tobias’s plots of the mind, where Character A is interacting with the wit, cleverness and mentality of the mechanics of the plot rather than with an antagonist. The details of this distinction, and how it can be seen as a facet of the other supergenres, will be made apparent later when the mystery and adventure genres are more extensively discussed. For now, it is sufficient to note how, as has been shown with the character-focused plots of the horror and the romance plots, the erotic plot begins with an action stage where Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B.
Turning back to ‘Victoria’s Hand’, in the opening paragraph the reader is presented with a scene where Victoria (Character A) is sitting in her parlour and Algernon (Entity B), is down on one knee before her, ready to propose. The narrative conflict in an erotic plot is driven by the impending prospect of intimacy between Character A and Entity B. So, this impending prospect of intimacy is apparent in the action stage of ‘Red by Any Other Name’, where Kathleen Bradean’s unnamed narrator begins the story having phone sex with a vampire (2009). The vampire suggests a meeting and the narrator reluctantly agrees. The narrator is the story’s Character A. The vampire is Entity B. The suggested conflict is their proposed physical liaison balanced against the narrator’s worries that the meeting will fail to be as satisfying as the telephone relationship. Likewise, Kay Jaybee’s story, ‘Becky’ (2007), begins in medias res with the action stage being summed up in a single reflective paragraph,\(^{31}\) where the unnamed narrator speculates on whether or not her friend Becky will be upset by the unusual disciplinary procedures that are executed in the office they now share. This setup establishes that Becky is the Character A in this story while the person implementing the unconventional disciplinary practices takes the role of Entity B. The conflict in this story arises from the narrator’s worries about how Becky will react to the impending discipline. Finally, in Janine Ashbless’s ‘Of High Renown’ (2012), Emlhi, a wise woman, Character A, is taken from her home to cure an injured knight, Entity B. The conflicts in this narrative involve matters of life and death, as well as sex and sanctimony. However, in common with all erotic plots, the interpretation of these

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\(^{31}\) Regardless of my warnings, she had applied for the administrative vacancy at the office where I work. Perhaps I was wrong to be wary. Becky had always listened eagerly to the tales I told before dismissively saying, “Don’t be ridiculous, that sort of thing doesn’t really happen,” quickly followed by, “so what happened next?” Maybe I shouldn’t have told her anything. It's too late now. (Jaybee, 2007: 94)
conflicts can be seen as reimaginings of the contrast between societally appropriate attitudes to these dilemmas and Character A’s desired responses: decency conflicting with indecency. Importantly, because this is an erotic story, it goes without saying that the administration of the cure involves physical, sexually explicit intimacy.

Intimacy in the context of the erotic short story is a term that covers a broad range of physical acts. Invariably the types of intimacy and levels of interaction are dictated by a need to balance the requirements of the publisher, the perceived expectations of the audience, and the imagination of the writer. The three titles listed above are demonstrative of this broad range. Each is produced by Cleis Press, a US publisher renowned for its prolific catalogue of erotic short fiction anthologies.

Cleis titles regularly feature themed anthologies, sometimes focusing on specific sexual activities, such as Rachel Kramer Bussel’s *Rubber Sex* (2008), a collection of erotica concentrating on rubber fetishes; or Bussel’s anthology *Tasting Her* (2008), a collection of oral sex stories; or Cara Bruce’s *Best Fetish Erotica* (2002), a celebration of various sexualised fetishes. Similarly, Cleis produces some titles that are targeted at a specific readership, such as Cara Bruce’s *Best Bisexual Women’s Erotica* (2001), erotic fiction written for bisexual women; Violet Blue’s *Lust* (2007), erotic fantasises for women; and Blue’s *Sweet Love* (2010), erotic fantasies for couples. Cleis also produces collections of erotic fiction that incorporate elements of other genres, such as D. L. King’s *The Sweetest Kiss* (2009), a collection of vampire erotica; Alison Tyler’s (2008), *Open for Business,*
an anthology of office-based erotica; and Mitzi Szereto’s *Red Velvet and Absinthe* (2011), a collection of erotic stories told in the style of gothic horrors. This extensive range of publications is mentioned to illustrate the point that all these titles come from a single publisher in the genre of erotic fiction. The intimacy within typical, short erotic fiction from this publisher covers a broad range of interactions catering for a wide range of audience expectations.

On that note, it should be mentioned that ‘Victoria’s Hand’ was written specifically to meet the requirements of Rachel Kramer Bussel’s call for submissions for the Cleis title *She’s on Top* (2007). Bussel had asked for short erotic fiction that illustrated female sexual dominance in an innovative and original setting. Knowing that I would be competing for acceptance with a broad range of respected and capable peers, I reasoned that a story with conventional erotic content, but with characterisation that humorously usurped the stereotype of passive female acquiescence associated with Victorian mores, would be sufficiently innovative to merit the editor’s interest. My focus during the creation of the story was partly fixed on my knowledge of the competition I was facing: the initial audience for the finished product (the editor) and the subsequent audience the editor needed to satisfy. Unlike the other stories presented in this thesis, I wrote ‘Victoria’s Hand’ for a specific market with a full knowledge of the potential audience. It is included here because I wanted to see if a successful piece of fiction I had written earlier in my writing career would conform to the syntactic structures I was finding in other examples of genre fiction.
In ‘Victoria’s Hand’, the pacing is measured in order to engage the reader’s interest, whilst its sexual content functions to continually arouse the reader. The reaction stage of this story is probably best illustrated by journalist Susie Bright’s comments, where she extends a metaphor of sexual intimacy to the writing of erotic fiction:

Think of your plot as an erotic device. Every story line has a buildup [sic], a conflict, a climax, and a conclusion, just like the physiological arc of an orgasm. If you don’t have an ‘orgasmlike’ structure to your story, then you don’t have a story at all. (2001: 116)

Discussing the necessities required for the concluding stage of stories of erotic fiction, author Morgan Hawke says: ‘End where you began—back at square one. Make it a nice tidy loop. It tells the reader: “The next story is about to begin!”’ (2007: 132). On some levels this suggests a wholly satisfactory resolution but, considering individual stories from the genre, it becomes clear that the conclusion of a typical erotic story shares more similarities with the horror genre than with romance in that there is often a suggestion that more content is going to be generated after the conclusion.

Thus, in Justine Elyot’s ‘The Final Frontier’, the story concludes with the following exchange. The couple talking have just shared their first experience of anal sex, the ‘final frontier’ of the title:

‘What are you going to do now, with no final frontier?’ I asked him a few days after that first trip into the beyond. ‘Where can you go?’ ‘Well, it’s quite a big frontier,’ he said, causing me to widen my eyes in indignation. ‘No, I don’t mean your arse is big. I just mean it takes a long time to cross. A really long time. Lots and lots of attempts. In fact, I’m not sure I’ll ever truly finish crossing it.’ He spoke the truth. (Elyot, 2014: 140)
From this exchange the reader can see, even though the intimacy has been satisfactory for both parties, the same intimacy will be revisited and developed beyond the conclusion of the presented story. This prospect of further intimacy occurring after the conclusion of the story is also apparent in Jean Roberta’s ‘The Placement of Modifiers’:

‘I don’t care,’ she swears with the fervency of her kind. ‘I don’t care. Doctor Chalkdust, I’m so glad I met you.’  
‘I’m glad too,’ I laugh. ‘You uncouth lump.’ I am grateful to Athena, Goddess of knowledge, for continually sending me what I need as She sends me the ones who need me. My life feels like an endless work-in-progress in which all the modifiers turn out to be perfectly placed.  
(Roberta, 2009: 197)

In Roberta’s story, ‘modifiers’ are those submissive characters who reluctantly bend to Doctor Chalkdust’s will. The concluding lines tell the reader that, although they have witnessed one of these encounters, there will be many others to follow. At the conclusion of ‘Victoria’s Hand’, the protagonist finally offers to give her suitor the relief he hasn’t been allowed to enjoy throughout the story:

Her smile was thin-lipped with satisfaction. She gestured for him to come closer and said, ‘Very well. You may leave shortly and go and tell your parents, your employer and the bishop that I have consented to be your wife.’ Her gaze sparkled with mischievous intent as she reached for his length. Encircling his shaft with lace-gloved fingers, she said, ‘But before you go and do any of those things, didn’t you say you wanted my hand?’

If intimacy were grammatically gendered as neuter – that is, described as ‘it’ – then it would be appropriate to say that, like the horror story, the typical erotic story concludes with an ‘It lives! Ending’. The prospect of intimacy, just like the prospect of horror, promises to return after the end of the story and will continue to inform events that are as engaging as those that make up the fiction that has just been
read. Just as the partial resolution of the consequences in the short horror plot leaves the reader with the suggestion that the horror could continue or return, the partial resolution of the consequences in the short erotic story leaves the suggestion that the intimacy could either continue or be revisited. This suggestion of revisited intimacy can be seen in the concluding lines of many erotic short stories. It is apparent in Shanna Germain’s ‘Perfect Bound’: ‘I’m expecting the dark-haired boy who does my books any minute now’ (2008: 16). It is explicit in Tulsa Brown’s ‘Temporary’: ‘I fluttered my fingernails down his chest in a teasing, butterfly trail. “And she just might sing for you again”’ (2007: 12). It is equally foregrounded in the conclusion of Saskia Walker’s ‘The Woman in his Room’:

A moment later Luke reached out to me, pulled me closer, and kissed me, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. The doubts inside of me slipped away. I was being introduced to a world of sensuality and erotic possibility. And I was ready, ready for all of it. (Walker, 2009: 182)

In each of these stories, although fully satisfactory and explicit sexual intimacy has been the focus of the fiction, the conclusion hints at the idea that there will be more to follow: that the acts of intimacy described have only partially addressed the needs of the central character(s) for satisfaction. Again, the content of this plot, the repetition of the action, reaction and consequences stages that are repeated in so many examples of short erotic fiction, can be seen to be an essential part of the genre.

As mentioned before, each of these three supergenres in short fiction, the horror genre, the romance genre and the erotic genre, share a focus on the relationship between Character A and Entity B. By contrast, in the following chapters, the discussion will consider the mystery and adventure genres which, instead of
concentrating on the relationship between characters, focus on the relationship between Character A and the mechanics of the plot.
Chapter 6: The Mystery Genre

Quid Pro Quo

December, 1867

“Professor Moriarty?”

Moriarty glanced up from his paperwork and shook his head. His features were sharp and angular. He was youthful, barely out of his twenties, but his hair was already the grey of a pending thunderstorm. He could have appeared austere and menacing if not for the brightness of his genial smile. The flash of his teeth shone with obvious good humour and kind, inoffensive mirth.

“Professor?” Moriarty laughed. “Goodness, no. I’m likely the Moriarty you’re looking for. It’s not a common name around these parts. But I’m not a professor. I’m only a humble reader. I haven’t been offered the chair yet.”

He encouraged his visitor to enter the room and motioned for him to sit on the other side of his cluttered desk. There was still snow dusting the shoulders of the visitor’s woollen jacket. His uncapped head glistened with melting snowflakes which perspired down his brow and over his cheeks.

“Please,” Moriarty insisted. “Make yourself comfortable. The weather is very festive today, isn’t it?”

“Thank you, Professor.”

Like many of the academic offices in the university, Moriarty’s quarters were cramped to the point of claustrophobia. The shelved walls were overflowing with books. The desk was littered with pens, pencils, correspondence, papers, opened and unopened tomes, and piles and piles of marked and unmarked assignments. A copy of that month’s *Lancet* lay open on the page with Lister’s article about the
benefits of his ‘antiseptic surgical method.’ Beside that was a copy of that morning’s *Times*, headlined with the words CLERKENWELL OUTRAGE.

Moriarty tapped the largest bundle of papers on his desk and said, “Unless my treatise on the binomial theory meets with unprecedented success, I’m likely to remain a humble reader here for a long while.”

His guest, settling into the discomfort of the office’s only other seat, said nothing.

Moriarty found a black leather-bound notebook on his desk and began to leaf through the bright-white pages. The size and shape of the book suggested it might be a diary or a journal. Lettered in gold on the front were the words *quid pro quo*. Chasing his finger down one neatly written journal entry, Moriarty’s lips moved as he read through his day’s scheduled appointments. Eventually, he looked up from the book with a grin.

“It’s Gordon, isn’t it?”

Gordon nodded.

“Thank you for taking the time to come up here, Gordon. I understand you have a lot of important assignments to complete before the university closes for the Christmas holidays so it’s very much appreciated.”

“I didn’t come on a social visit,” Gordon explained. “Professor Bell sent me.”

“Good,” Moriarty laughed. “You’re direct. I like that. It suggests a focused mind.”

Gordon said nothing. He waited expectantly.

Moriarty picked up the leather-bound notebook and waved it importantly in the air as though it explained everything. “Professor Bell asked me to read through one of your papers. He believes you’ve been cheating.”
The light in the office was good. It was lit by a large window to the east and the morning sun washed the room with stark wintery warmth. Snow on the sills and ledges added to the brightness making every detail in Moriarty’s quarters superbly lit.

The sunlight illuminated Gordon’s face.

After Moriarty mentioned the accusation of cheating, Gordon’s pale cheeks blushed with the faintest hint of pink. His lips remained closed. His mouth was an inscrutable line, neither smiling nor frowning. Purposefully, he said nothing.

“This is a serious allegation,” Moriarty went on. His tone was etched with concern. “You’re in your final year, Gordon. It has to be said, your results on the whole have been unremarkable so far. But, up to this point, they’ve always been deemed honest. This accusation could prove ruinous for you.”

Gordon remained silent and motionless.

Moriarty watched the young man intently.

“You’ll note that I said ‘the accusation could prove ruinous’,” he went on. “With a scandal like this the accusation doesn’t have to be true. Accusations alone are often enough to devastate a fledgling career.” He pointed at the newspaper headline: CLERKENWELL OUTRAGE — a dozen dead, one hundred injured. “If they’re left unchecked, accusations can have that sort of impact,” he said darkly.

Gordon met his gaze. His lips didn’t move.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Gordon?”

Gordon straightened in his chair. He rolled his broad shoulders and squared his jaw. He had thought he was there to return a pen to Moriarty. Professor Bell had handed him the pen, a handsome looking thing in Gordon’s opinion, and told him to return it to Moriarty. Now, understanding that the pen had been used as a
ruse to get him to Moriarty’s office, Gordon waited to see what would transpire. The pen sat heavily in his jacket pocket as he considered Moriarty’s cool expression.

“I don’t suppose it matters what I have to say for myself,” Gordon began carefully. “If Professor Bell asked you to read through my paper, the only thing that matters is what you think. Do you think I’ve been cheating?”

Moriarty laughed again. It was a cheery sound and his tone seemed genuine.

“I wouldn’t want to play cards with you, Gordon,” he decided. “I’d wager you’ve won a fair share of bluffs in your day, haven’t you?”

Gordon didn’t answer.

The silence that stretched between them bordered on being interminable. Moriarty reached for pen, ink and paper. He placed them on the blotter and began to write a missive. As he wrote in a fussily neat hand, he read the words aloud.

“Dear Professor Bell,” he began.

Gordon’s eyes narrowed.

“At your request I have carefully examined the academic paper you suspected of being plagiarised.”

Moriarty glanced up from the note and studied his visitor.

Gordon tapped his shoe lightly on the floor. He could have been trying to dislodge snow from the tread, Moriarty thought. But, from the student’s posture, it seemed obvious that the toe of his boot was now pointing toward the office door. Even if Gordon was unaware of the fact, Moriarty thought, the young man appeared to be planning an escape route.
“I can understand why you had suspicions about this piece.” Moriarty continued to read the words aloud as he wrote them. “After having read some of the other works you feared had been copied, I also noted that there were some strong similarities in their structure, lexical choice and derivative conclusions.” Gordon’s lips had tightened to a puckered scowl. Wrinkles of concentration creased his otherwise smooth brow. His hands were curled into fists. Despite what he’d said before, Moriarty suspected, if Gordon really was a poker player, he should be well advised to limit his gambling to low stakes games. The blush was now more than a faint suggestion of pink. It was difficult to tell where the melting snow ended and Gordon’s nervous perspiration began. “However,” Moriarty continued. He paused long enough to write the word. “I am comfortable confirming that, in my opinion, this is all original work. The student appears to have worked hard on this paper. His efforts, whilst wholly conventional and lacking in imagination, are all his own endeavours. I trust his labours will be acknowledged appropriately without further recourse to unfounded accusation.” Moriarty added his signature to the letter. Gordon watched him fold it three times and seal it with wax before sitting back in his chair. “Why did you do that?” “You really are very direct,” Moriarty mused. “I do admire that quality. It shows a discipline of thought that so many lack.” He pointed at the open *Lancet* article on his desk and said, “That’s the same level of disciplined thought as
Doctor Lister has shown in using carbolic acid to treat infection during surgical procedures. If only more of us could be like that great man.”

“Why have you just declared me innocent of plagiarism?”

Moriarty closed his journal. His fingers drummed on the gold lettered words: *quid pro quo*. Eventually, he picked up the book and the letter and started out of the door. “Follow me, Gordon,” he called over his shoulder. “Let’s see if Professor Bell is in his office.”

He didn’t bother looking back to see if Gordon obeyed the instruction. He turned a sharp right out of his doorway and headed along an ancient Yorkshire stone corridor that led toward the courtyard. Readers and professors alike were dressed in a uniform of cap, gown and hood at all times. Moriarty’s robes flowed behind him like black waves of night. He marched through the halls that led to the courtyard with a brisk pace that made Gordon stumble to keep by his side. His boot heels clipped loudly against the stone floors of the university’s hallowed corridors.

Passing students and lecturers nodded curt greetings to Moriarty. The occasional student stopped to respectfully doff a cap. Gordon found himself lost and invisible in Moriarty’s shadow as he was ignored by all those who wanted to mark deference to the man in front of him. Even when he passed a classmate, Gordon was dismayed to see that his fellow student was too wrapped up in his own consternation to even acknowledge him. Gordon frowned and wondered where William could possibly think he was going now that Moriarty had left his office. He considered calling after him and then decided that his business with Moriarty took precedence.
Moriarty acknowledged each passing address and salutation with a polite smile and a word of greeting. He had the charming ability of remembering faces and calling people by their names and titles. It was no wonder, Gordon thought, that the man was so popular in the university’s halls.

“You haven’t answered my question,” Gordon reminded him. He kept his voice lowered to a hush. He considered returning the man’s pen but he reasoned this wasn’t the time. Instead, he asked, “Why have you told Professor Bell that I’m innocent?”

Moriarty opened his mouth as though he was about to reply.

“Sir?”

Before Moriarty could speak a redheaded youth stepped in front of him, stopping him abruptly. His whey-coloured complexion was lost beneath a murk of rusty freckles. His clothes had the pristine cut and starch of a privileged third year. Over one shoulder he carried a boxy leather bag. Clinking noises came from within the bag. Gordon recognised the sound as the musical tones of full glass bottles kissing together.

For an instant Gordon thought he could see a menacing glower on Moriarty’s features. Unlike the honest smile and full joviality of the man’s usual disposition, this was an expression that seemed appropriate for the narrow face and the iron-grey hair. This expression was a flicker of feral ferocity that could have belonged to a very violent man. If the expression had rested for an instant longer, Gordon would have stepped between the pair to prevent the younger man from suffering injury. Moriarty was raising his arm and looked set to smash the whey-faced youth to the floor.
“Sir,” the redhead youth repeated earnestly. “I was just coming up to find you. Indeed, this is fortuitous.”

“Hunt,” Moriarty beamed. He brought his arm down and clapped Hunt warmly on the shoulder.

Whatever suggestion of menace Gordon had thought was in Moriarty’s expression now seemed to have disappeared. The idea that it might ever have been there struck Gordon as damning evidence that Moriarty had been correct when he described Gordon’s work at the university as ‘wholly conventional and lacking in imagination.’

“I thought you’d have left by now,” Moriarty told Hunt. “Don’t tell me you want to do another year’s Latin?”

Hunt laughed with inordinate enthusiasm. He clutched Moriarty’s hand and pumped it enthusiastically up and down. Glancing slyly at Gordon he said, “Do you know this fine gentleman is the only reason I was able to continue my studies?”

Gordon raised an eyebrow, encouraging him to continue.

“I had the most miserable first year,” Hunt explained. “My interest in economics was failing. I didn’t feel as though I’d made any friends at the university. But Professor Moriarty here-”

“I’m not a professor,” Moriarty cautioned him. “I’m only a humble reader. I haven’t been offered the chair yet.”

The interruption seemed to surprise Hunt.

“Haven’t you submitted your treatise on the binomial theory?”

“Yes, but Professor Phillips remains the incumbent in the mathematics chair. And, unless my treatise meets with unprecedented success before the board of governors, I’m likely to remain a humble reader here for a long while.”
Hunt laughed again. This time the mirth sounded like genuine merriment rather than the forced laughter of a sycophant. “I think the board of governors will have to offer you a chair when they see your treatise. It’s the work of a genius.”

Moriarty lowered his gaze and looked abashed. “You’re too kind, Hunt. I’m sure I’d feel a lot more comfortable about such a situation if you were on the board of governors.”

Hunt shook his head apologetically.

“The only person I know on the board is Williamson’s father and you know that Williamson and I don’t see eye-to-eye.” Hunt paused and added, “Of course you know about that. You were the one who intervened when Williamson demanded I face him in a duel.”

As Gordon watched, Moriarty tightened his hold on the leather-bound volume. His thumb ran along the gold printed lettering on the cover. He seemed to be tracing the shape of each letter in the three Latin words: *quid pro quo*.

“Headstrong Williamson,” Moriarty remembered. “He really did fancy himself as the romantic hero of some *Boys of England* narrative, didn’t he?”

Hunt laughed.

“And,” Moriarty went on, “Now you mention it, I do believe you’re correct. Williamson’s father is on the board of governors, isn’t he?”

Hunt nodded.

“Williamson’s father did seem relieved that I’d been able to talk his son out of facing you with pistols at dawn,” Moriarty remembered.

Gordon watched the pair. The three of them stood in tableau for a moment before Hunt finally spoke.
“I just wanted to thank you again,” he said. From the bag he was carrying, he produced a bottle of whisky. Gordon could see the words *Ballantine’s Finest* printed on the label as Hunt passed the bottle to Moriarty. “It’s a token of my gratitude, Sir.”

“Whisky?” Moriarty seemed curious.

“Just a small token,” Hunt assured him. “And if there’s ever anything else you need from me in the future…”

He left the open promise of eternal obligation unspoken.

It hung between them like a physical presence.

Moriarty smiled and graciously accepted the gift. “Thank you, Hunt,” he said solemnly. “It’s been a pleasure having you in my lectures.” He lifted the whisky and added, “I’ll make sure to toast your name when I open this bottle.”

Hunt grinned. His teeth were crooked but his smile was easy to like.

Moriarty stepped past him and continued on his way to the courtyard. Over his shoulder he called back, “Hunt, please congratulate your father on his promotion to governorship of the Bank of England.” As he said the words, like a curious involuntary action, his hand squeezed on the book. His thumb rubbed across the lettering: *quid pro quo*.

“How did you help him with the bullies?”

Moriarty shook his head. “It was nothing really. Hunt is susceptible to bullying. I suspect it’s with him being redheaded. Many people assume a redheaded man has Irish blood in his veins and there’s always been a lot of anti-Irish sentiment brewing in this country.” He frowned and said, “I suspect it will get worse after the Clerkenwell outrage last night.”
Gordon nodded agreement. He’d read that morning’s *Times* before being sent to Moriarty. The explosion at the Clerkenwell detention centre appeared to have been an ill-conceived catastrophe. Fenian activists had botched an attempt to help one of their comrades escape incarceration. Twelve innocents were dead. More than a hundred had been injured.

“Is Hunt Irish?”

“No,” Moriarty admitted. “There’s no Gaelic in his lineage. But that didn’t stop a gang of students from making his existence a misery because they thought he looked Irish.”

“How did you intervene?”

Moriarty paused and turned to face Gordon. His thumb stroked the gold letters on the book again. “We came to an amicable agreement about the situation,” he said carefully. “Some of those involved in the bullying come from prominent families. You know Gladstone’s children come here, don’t you?”

Gordon nodded. He was aware that the leader of the opposition’s children patronised the university. Cohorts over the previous years had included European royalty, the sons of celebrated military heroes and the children of industrial tycoons. Gordon considered himself fortunate that his parents had invested so much into his education so he could study alongside the future leaders of the country.

“A lot of prominent families send their children here,” he agreed.

Moriarty nodded.

“Hunt’s family didn’t want to pursue the incidence of bullying. They were aware that things could reflect badly on Hunt if he was perceived weak enough to be a victim of bullying. The families of the bullies were equally relieved to learn
that the matter was being resolved without becoming public knowledge. The whole situation was resolved amicably."

Gordon digested this quietly for a moment. Hunt and his family were now indebted to Moriarty. The eminent families of a gang of bullies were equally beholden to him. Was there anyone in the university who didn’t owe this kind man some small favour? Was there anyone in the universe who wasn’t in his debt?

“How do they pay you back?”

Moriarty blushed. He turned and started back toward the courtyard. “We all find a way to pay our debts, Gordon.”

Gordon wanted to pursue the matter but Moriarty had reached the courtyard and was striding purposefully toward Professor Bell’s offices.

The lawns were covered in a thin veil of white. The slates of the building roofs were frosted with snow. The air was cold enough to make each exhalation plume softly. Moriarty seemed embarrassed by the question of repayment and Gordon was trying to think of a way to retract the question. Before Gordon could find the right way to put his thoughts into words they were again interrupted.

A tall, broad man approached. He walked with the gait of a military gentleman. A stick in his right hand clipped softly through the snow as an accompaniment to every other step. Moriarty slowed as the man neared and, when they were close enough, the pair clasped hands with the ferocity of lifelong friends.

“Sebastian Moran,” Moriarty called cheerfully. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Likewise, Professor.”

Moriarty laughed the epithet away. “I’m not a professor yet. I’m only a humble reader. I haven’t been offered the chair yet.”
“Haven’t you submitted your treatise on the binomial theory?”

“It’s been submitted,” Moriarty assured Moran. “I’m waiting for feedback from the board of governors. And even then, there’s the issue of Professor Phillips.”

Moran sighed. “Did you see the Fenians botched their escape plans last night?”

“I read the piece in the Times.” Moriarty shook his head sadly. “Some people say the city is in the grip of an organised criminal mastermind but this seems to have been a very disorganised affair.”

“Informers had notified authorities,” Moran told him. “But the authorities didn’t heed those warnings.”

“It’s almost as though they were given help,” Moriarty mused.

He stared wistfully across the courtyard. He seemed unmindful of the light snow falling about him. “It’s almost as if some mastermind, acting in the interests of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, called in favours and asked figures in authority to turn a blind eye to any of the warnings they received.” His thumb rubbed across the gold lettering on his leather-bound volume: quid pro quo. His smile looked to have frozen in the chill morning air. “It’s almost as though someone went to all that trouble. And still the Fenians botched everything.”

Moran cleared his throat.

Moriarty frowned and studied Moran with a peevish glare.

Moran nodded at Gordon. “I’m sure this student doesn’t want to hear about your speculation on last night’s bombing,” Moran said pointedly.

“A good point,” Moriarty agreed. “Perhaps we should meet for lunch this afternoon and share our speculation on the Irish problem then?”
“A splendid idea,” Moran agreed. He hefted up the walking stick he’d been carrying and passed it to Moriarty. “Before we part I must show you this device. A German colleague engineered it for me.”

“A walking stick?” Moriarty smiled. “Do we really need German engineers for such devices?”

Moran took the stick from Moriarty, placed the handle against his shoulder as though he was wielding a rifle, and then aimed into the distance.

A sprinkling of snow continued to fall from the sky. To Gordon’s mind, unless Moran was the world’s most exceptional marksman, whatever he was pointing the stick at, the target was fully obscured by the weather.

“Moran?” Moriarty asked doubtfully.

There was a hiss of air.

Gordon thought he saw some small missile explode from the pointed end of the walking stick. But it all happened so fast he couldn’t be entirely sure. More interesting than Moran’s hissing walking stick was the distant sound of shattering glass across the courtyard. The noise was followed by a shrill whisper of wind. It made a sound like a heartfelt cry of dismay.

“Fascinating.” Moriarty sounded genuinely impressed. “I can imagine we’ll find plenty of future uses for such an ingenious creation when we’re having lunch.”

Moran agreed. He bade them both a good afternoon and allowed Moriarty and Gordon to continue walking toward Professor Bell’s quarters.

“What was that device?” Gordon asked when Moran was out of earshot.

Moriarty shrugged. “I have no idea,” he admitted. “I suspect Moran will tell me all about it over lunch.”
A light wind blew through the settled snow, dislodging a small flurry of flakes across their route. Moriarty’s black gown and mortarboard were both white with icy residue and Gordon thought the man looked like some saintly figure from the days of the Bible. Hurrying behind him, desperate to escape the frosty elements, Gordon bundled himself tight in his woollen jacket and kept his head down until they had entered the building on the opposite side of the courtyard.

Moriarty shrugged the snow from his cape with a roll of his shoulders. Gordon tramped up and down to dislodge snow from his boots and shake it from his head. They hadn’t started on the stairwell up to Bell’s quarters when an elderly man approached them.

“Professor Moriarty,” he began. “May I have a word?”

“Chancellor White.” Moriarty’s smile remained polite. “Of all the people I need to remind, surely you know I’m not a professor yet.” He said the words with easy cheer. “I’m only a humble reader. I haven’t been offered the chair yet.”

Chancellor White shook his head.

“I’ve just come from a meeting with the board of governors. We’ve been reading through your treatise on the binomial theory. The governors would like to offer you a chair in mathematics, Professor Moriarty.” He stressed the title, took Moriarty’s hand and squeezed it in his own. “Congratulations,” White muttered. “And, please remember, I’m still in your debt.”

Moriarty seemed briefly puzzled.

“Without your intervention my daughter would have been locked away in a sanatorium. If you ever need any favour from me, any favour at all, please rest assured I’ll do whatever is in my power to—”

“I might just take you up on that offer one day,” Moriarty broke in genially.
He continued shaking the elderly man’s hand.

He held the leather-bound journal in his other hand. His thumb continually stroked the gold letters: quid pro quo.

“I should also tell you,” the chancellor went on, “that your appointment to the chair is timely.”

“Timely?”

“The chair was previously held by Professor Phillips. Not ten minutes ago he collapsed in his study.”

“Good grief,” Moriarty gasped. “Collapsed?”

Chancellor White nodded. “His office window is broken and it’s almost as though someone shot him.”

“Who on earth would want to shoot an incumbent professor in the chair of mathematics?” Moriarty asked.

White shrugged. His cool expression suggested there was truth in the rumours of his disdain for Phillips. “Maybe one day there’ll be a great detective who can solve such mysteries,” White admitted. “But, until such a person comes along, the likes of you and I shall have to muddle along in ignorance, oblivious to the causes of such matters.”

He shook Moriarty’s hand for a second time, acknowledged Gordon with a curt nod, and then left them to make their way up the stairs to Professor Bell’s quarters.

They paused outside the room.

“I’ll give this to you now,” Moriarty told Gordon, handing him the letter. “And I’ll leave you to talk with Professor Bell. If I’m going to make that meeting with Moran I’ll need to get back to my quarters and change.”
Gordon shook Moriarty’s hand and held it a moment longer than necessary.

“How fortunate you’re a good man, Professor Moriarty,” he mused.

“How so?”

“It just occurred to me, because so many people are in your debt, you could one day wield a lot of power. If you were not an honest man – if you were a dishonest man – the empire of your control would be a formidable one.”

Moriarty considered this for a moment. “What an interesting thought.”

“At the moment,” Gordon went on, “people are in your debt because of your kindness. But, if you chose to blackmail any of those individuals with your knowledge of their circumstances or indiscretions, you could control the same web of corruption as the criminal mastermind you speculated about earlier.”

Moriarty nodded. “Indeed,” he said. “I can see how that would work.” His easy smile flashed briefly and he added, “It’s fortunate that I’m honest.”

Gordon shook his hand. “Thank you for saving me from the accusations of plagiarism,” he said earnestly. “I’m now another who is in your debt. I have desires to work in the constabulary and an accusation of dishonesty, even though it was unfounded, would have posed a serious threat to such a career ambition.”

“The constabulary?” Moriarty sounded surprised. “I had no idea. I could have sworn Professor Bell said your career ambitions were for local government.”

It was an odd remark, Gordon thought. He had a classmate, William Gordon, who aspired to work in local government. But the civil service was never an occupation that had interested Gordon himself. It crossed his mind that, perhaps, Moriarty had been expecting William Gordon when he turned up to return Moriarty’s pen. He wondered if it was possible that he had never been under suspicion of plagiarism and if his entire exchange with Moriarty had been a
conversation that should have happened between the professor and William Gordon. Perhaps that was why William Gordon had been heading to the professor’s office? Although he remembered the pen in his pocket at that point, Gordon made no attempt to reach for it for fear that the action might prompt a realisation in Moriarty that their conversation was a mistake.

Moriarty considered Gordon expectantly. He had been smiling since Gordon first mentioned his interest in a career in law enforcement. “In future years,” he began. “Should I ever need the intervention of a police officer, would I be able to call on you?”

“Of course,” Gordon promised.

“Very well then,” Moriarty smiled. “I shall bid you farewell now and look forward to meeting you in the future, Officer Gordon.”

Gordon nodded and smiled and found he didn’t have the words to correct the man. Holding onto the pen he figured, for the moment, it was enough to let the professor continue with his misunderstanding rather than explaining that his surname was Lestrade.

THE END
Analysis of the Mystery Genre and its Associated Plot

*Nil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio* \(^{32}\)

The table below shows the syntactic structure of a short mystery plot, as well as the content of ‘Quid Pro Quo’, with both broken down to give a description of their categories of action, reaction and consequences. It will be argued during the following discussion that the plot of ‘Quid Pro Quo’ contains the typical attributes of the syntactic aspect of the plot most commonly associated with the supergenre of mystery fiction.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Mystery</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
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<td>Quid Pro Quo</td>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Concept B. (^{33})</td>
<td>Character A uncovers the puzzle presented by Concept B.</td>
<td>Concept B is resolved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gordon Lestrade is introduced to Moriarty.</td>
<td>Lestrade is presented with information that allows him to establish whether Moriarty is manipulating events or if he is the benign recipient of good fortune.</td>
<td>Lestrade has enough information to make a decision about the puzzle.</td>
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\(^{32}\) *Nothing is more hateful to the senses than too much cunning* (Seneca). This is the epigram that precedes Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’.

\(^{33}\) Concept B is a puzzle that the reader is expected to solve. Writer Carolyn Wells (1913: 31-32) says, ‘it is obvious that the various types or kinds of mystery story cannot be classified with exactness; so they may be generally divided into three groups—a broad classification which will best suit our purpose: Ghost stories, Riddle stories, and Detective stories.’ However, it should be acknowledged that each of these broad classifications is a subgenre of the mystery story with a puzzle at its centre.
‘Quid Pro Quo’ was written for editor Maxim Jakubowski’s anthology, *The Adventures of Moriarty* (2015), where the brief was to produce a piece of original fiction featuring Professor Moriarty. In his call for submissions, Jakubowski wrote:

Moriarty, the Napoleon of crime, is a familiar character, although he only actually appeared in two Sherlock stories. I am seeking a broad mix of stories in which he can alternately appear in his guise as a master criminal, or even as a fallible human being […], but more importantly I am hoping the stories I am sent will be entertaining, ingenious and witty as well as gripping. (Jakubowski, 2015: n.p.)

Assuming the intended audience for this anthology would be readers who were familiar with Moriarty’s history, I wanted to write something that would make appropriate reference to the established details of the character’s life. In ‘The Final Problem’, *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes tells Watson:

> ‘At the age of twenty-one he [Moriarty] wrote a treatise upon the Binomial Theorem, which has had a European vogue. On the strength of it he won the Mathematical Chair at one of our smaller universities, and had, to all appearances, a most brilliant career before him’. (Doyle, 1893: 178-179)

Taking this detail as a starting point, I thought it would be entertaining to build a story around Moriarty being awarded the Mathematical Chair for his treatise on the Binomial Theorem. I also thought it would make for a more interesting read to present Moriarty as an ambiguous character so the reader could try to decide whether he is the naïve benefactor of reciprocated good fortune, good fortune that is given to him willingly by those indebted to his generous nature, or a calculating puppet-master exploiting reciprocal exchanges from those who have had the misfortune to become obligated to him.34 It is in this ambiguity that the puzzle of

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34 As previously stated, although the action stage of the mystery story involves Character A being introduced to the puzzle that is Concept B, there is an expectation that the reader will also be trying to solve the puzzle.
this mystery is presented to the reader in the action stage of the plot: is the Moriarty in this story a villain or a hero?

I should confirm at this point that the story was written with very little specific research into typical tropes of the mystery genre. I was already familiar with most of the Sherlock Holmes stories, having read them as a child. I was also familiar with the character of Moriarty as he has been a staple in modern interpretations of the Sherlock Holmes stories such as Guy Ritchie’s film, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) and the Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat BBC series collaboration, *Sherlock* (2010-2017). Additionally, given the broad scope of the brief, I figured I could play freely with the physical description of Moriarty and had little limiting my presentation of his personality. Because I was writing about a Moriarty who existed several years prior to Holmes and Watson encountering him, it seemed acceptable to leave his physical characteristics unspecified as the story focused on the plot rather than the personality. More importantly, trying to remain true to the spirit of this thesis by not explicitly researching the genre or the market prior to writing the fiction, I simply attempted to produce a story that would suit my ideal of a narrative appropriate for a Sherlock Holmes-type fiction, and would meet the dictates of the aforementioned brief by including a short passage describing Moriarty’s academic accomplishments.

The action stage of the mystery plot, the introduction of Character A to the puzzle that is Concept B, is a fundamental component of this type of narrative. This puzzle represents the plot-specific conflict between ignorance and information: the conflict that sits within every mystery story. In the opening scenes of Sherlock
Holmes stories, the puzzle is most frequently introduced as Watson narrates the issues that have caused a client to call at 221b Baker Street requesting the services of Holmes, hoping the famous consulting detective can supply information to address the client’s ignorance. It is in this action stage that the puzzle is presented to Holmes (and by extension, to the reader) and this inevitably leads to a reaction stage where the pieces of the puzzle are systematically discovered and their relevance to the story is identified. This same condition of the action stage can be seen in the fiction of Agatha Christie, where detectives such as Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot (and again, by extension, the reader) are immediately introduced to the puzzle that is at the heart of the story.

It is in this aspect of the action stage, perhaps, that the mystery plot differs most dramatically from the three aforementioned plots ascribed to the supergenres of horror, romance and erotica. The focus of the mystery plot is on the solving of the puzzle and, in short mystery fiction, there is little attention given to character growth. To justify this sweeping statement, I would argue that it seems fair to say that, in the fiction associated with Miss Marple, the character remains consistent in her attitudes and her approach to solving mysteries. This consistency can be seen from her 1927 debut in the short story ‘The Tuesday Night Club’, through to her final appearance in the 1971 novel *Nemesis*. Miss Marple begins and ends as a character modest about her abilities yet confident in her interpretation of evidence. She does not condone wickedness but she appears infinitely sympathetic to those who fall under erroneous suspicion. Through each story, Miss Marple is presented as a single-minded character determined to solve a puzzle, but her character

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35 Later adapted to become the first chapter in *The Thirteen Problems*. 
never demonstrates any suggestion of growth. The same argument about static characterisation can be made for many of the stock cast that populate short mystery fiction, such as Sherlock Holmes, Auguste Dupin, Hercule Poirot, Philip Marlowe and a wealth of other professional and amateur detectives. Character growth is negligible in the mystery story when considered against the all-important goal of solving that plot’s particular puzzle.

As mentioned previously (Chapter 5: Analysis of the Erotic Genre and its Associated Plot), this can be seen as a similar distinction to that made by Tobias, where he divides stories into plots of the body and plots of the mind. However, this distinction might benefit from some small refinement and a little clarification. It goes without saying that most fiction contains characters and the majority of those characters possess a body and a mind. Therefore it would appear to be potentially confusing to describe stories as being driven by one aspect when both are contained within the narrative. Nevertheless, if we consider the plot of the horror, romance or erotic narrative as being focused on the body, we can see that the conflict within those stories comes from characters being forced into a relationship with other characters, where that relationship can be seen respectively as combative, romantic and sexual. In mystery stories and adventure stories, stories that can be considered as plots of the mind, the narrative is developed through the main character being brought into conflict with various elements of the storyworld, such as an unsolved crime or a situation that needs addressing through action or adventure.
In ‘Quid Pro Quo’ the action stage begins with an introduction to the two main characters, Gordon and Moriarty, and the accusation of cheating that has been made against Gordon. In addition to this accusation of cheating, the reader will be aware of Moriarty’s nefarious reputation in the Sherlock Holmes universe, and should be trying to balance the villainous qualities of the known character against the genial person being presented in the first pages of this story. If it is accepted that the conflict within the mystery plot comes from the juxtaposition of ignorance and information, it seems apparent that the action stage is defining these terms within this story.

Author Carolyn Wheat addresses the reaction stage of those plots she identifies as detective stories when she says: ‘Writing the middle […] is a lot like driving through Texas. You think it’s never going to end, and all the scenery looks the same’. She goes on to ask, ‘So what breaks the monotony? How can you keep the tension high as your detective essentially plods through the detail-oriented work of criminal investigation? In a detective story, the detective detects’ (2011: n.p.). Whilst Wheat’s explanation sounds simplistic, this is a pragmatic description of any mystery story’s reaction stage: a logical reaction to whatever has been set up in the action stage, an exploration of the puzzle that makes Concept B so characteristically mysterious. In a similarly straightforward fashion, Millard Kaufmann, discussing the reaction stage of the story from the perspective of a screenwriter, says:

Your second act focuses on the developmental confrontation between hero and heavy. Once the conflict between them is joined, the obstacles set up in your hero's path, by the heavy and his bravos, should be increasingly formidable: more difficult to overcome as the story progresses. (1999: 126)
Admittedly, this is a somewhat standard depiction of the second act of a story. However, although it describes the hero (Character A) in a series of confrontations, rather than Character A trying to solve the puzzle that is Concept B, this description can still apply to stories within the mystery genre because, whenever Character A does encounter heavies, the conflict invariably arises because Character A is trying to obtain essential information from the heavy, or the heavy is trying to conceal information that would otherwise help Character A solve the puzzle.36 This development can be seen in a range of stories that represent typical fare for the mystery supergenre. Heavies beat up Steve Threefall in ‘Nightmare Town’ during the reaction stage of Dashiell Hammet’s story, inadvertently providing more information by committing their attack than they manage to conceal in their attempts to dissuade his investigation (Hammet, 2013). Heavies run Joe Puma off the road in William Campbell Gault’s ‘Stolen Star’, killing his assistant and giving Puma the motive to continue following the case long after his obligations to his client have ended (Gault, 1997: 141-159). Stephen Greenleaf’s creation, John Marshall Tanner, confronts the character Marvin, a heavy who controls the baby-smuggling ring in the story ‘Iris’, and it is because of this violent confrontation that Tanner forces Marvin to give up his criminal operation (Greenleaf, 1997: 444-462). This is not to say that there is violence and a heavy in every mystery story. This is simply to point out that the obstacles presented in the mystery story by Kaufmann’s ‘heavies and bravos’ are usually there to add something to the process of solving the puzzle.

36 A heavy, in the context of the mystery genre, is usually a strong, muscular person hired for protection and/or to inflict physical violence on another.
Rather than being introduced to the obstacles of heavies or bravos, in ‘Quid Pro Quo’, the reader is simply given clues to help solve the puzzle(s) presented in the action stage. Gordon’s questions remain mostly unanswered, and this suggests a certain evasiveness in Moriarty’s character. Moriarty is shown to hold sway over characters such as Williamson’s father, who is in a position to help Moriarty acquire the Mathematical Chair he desires. Moriarty’s companion, Moran, shoots a missile in the direction of Professor Phillips’s office. Each of these details contributes to a clearer picture of Moriarty, or at least suggests that subterfuge and villainy are not beyond the bounds of possibility, as the story progresses to the consequences that are revealed in the conclusion.

The consequences of the typical mystery story are apparent in ‘Quid Pro Quo’, although the text of this story does not explicitly state the successful resolution of Concept B. In ‘Quid Pro Quo’, Moriarty simply affirms that Gordon Lestrade will now be in his debt:

‘The constabulary?’ Moriarty sounded surprised. ‘I had no idea.’ He paused and considered Gordon expectantly. ‘And, in future years, should I ever need the intervention of a police officer would I be able to call on you?’

As the intention was to present the reader with an ambiguous mystery, the story does not have a definitive conclusion. Given that the story is about a character who goes on to become ‘the Napoleon of crime’, the implication of Machiavellian intent is sufficient for the audience to make an educated inference. As writer

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37 Concept B is resolved.
38 Is Moriarty simply a pleasant man haplessly engendering a culture of reciprocity? Or is he a calculating villain cultivating indebtedness for his own gain?
Edward D. Hoch explains, ‘Fred Dannay, one-half of Ellery Queen, once told me it’s all right to let the reader solve the mystery occasionally’ (2002: 230). In this story, in line with Dannay’s suggestion, the reader is being allowed to solve the mystery.

It should be pointed out that the need for a resolution to Concept B in this genre is so important to the satisfactory rendering of a mystery story that it is seldom explicitly stated. When S. S. Van Dine, author of the Philo Vance novels, wrote his ‘Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories’, the necessity for solving the puzzle of Concept B was treated as a given in rules such as, ‘The culprit must be determined by logical deductions – not by accident or coincidence or unmotivated confession’ and ‘The problem of the crime must be solved by strictly naturalistic means. Such methods for learning the truth as slate-writing, Ouija-boards, mind-reading, spiritualistic se’ances [sic], crystal-gazing, and the like, are taboo’ (1928). Note that each of these rules begins with the phrase, ‘The culprit must be determined’ or ‘the crime must be solved’ [the italics here show my emphasis]. There is no scope for an unsuccessful resolution. Todorov treats the resolution of the puzzle of Concept B as being an obvious aspect of the narrative when he describes the content of a typical crime story as, ‘The hundred and fifty pages which separate the discovery of the crime from the revelation of the killer’ (1971: 45). Again, he allows no scope for an unsuccessful resolution. Ann Rule, discussing the subgenre of true crime, stresses the importance for the resolution of Concept B by saying, ‘Don’t pick an unsolved case. There has to be an ending to please the reader’ (cited in Grafton, 2002: 259). As James Scott Bell advises, ‘You want to leave your readers with a last page that makes the ending more than
satisfying’ (2004: 108). In other words, these authors are suggesting that readers require an ending that offers a satisfactory resolution.

The features of the supergenre of mystery, and the related complexities of its subordinate, basic level subgenres (such as the police procedural, the hard-boiled detective, and the whodunit), can be illustrated by an examination of ‘The Purloined Letter’ (Poe, 1845/1992: 205-223). As was mentioned before, the prototypical mystery plot follows a distinct pattern. Action: Character A is brought into conflict with Concept B. Reaction: Character A uncovers the puzzle presented by Concept B. Consequences: Concept B is resolved. This sequence of events can be seen in ‘The Purloined Letter’ where Auguste Dupin, Character A, is brought into conflict with the puzzle of a missing letter, Concept B. The original owner of the letter is a high-ranking royal whom Jacques Lacan (1972: 39-72) identifies as the Queen. The Prefect of the Parisian Police, Monsieur G, is working diligently to protect this high-ranking royal from potential embarrassment. The purloiner in the story is Minister D, a man who, according to Poe, ‘dares all things, those unbecoming as well as those becoming a man’ (1845/1992: 207 - 208). Monsieur G explains the dilemma that the royal is facing:

‘the disclosure of the document to a third person, who shall be nameless, would bring in question the honour of a personage of most exalted station; and this fact gives the holder of the document an ascendency over the illustrious personage whose honour and peace are so jeopardized.’ (Poe, 1845/1992: 207)

39 The solution to this puzzle can either be presented by Character A’s understanding and explication of the puzzle’s complexities or through the narrator’s presentation of sufficient information to allow the reader to successfully solve the puzzle, with or without Character A’s efforts.
This is a similar set-up to the events that occur in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1892: 3 - 228). In this story Count Von Kramm commissions Sherlock Holmes, Character A, to retrieve an incriminating photograph from the possession of Irene Adler. Here it is the retrieval of the photograph that is Concept B.

It should be noted that, whilst Sherlock Holmes stories are usually perceived as narratives where the detective solves a case and apprehends the criminal, according to graphic designers Adam Frost and Jim Kynvin (2015: n.p.), only 33 per cent of criminals and culprits in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are handed over to the police at the end of the narrative. This is mentioned to illustrate the point that, whilst the puzzle at the centre of Concept B is an essential component of the typical mystery story, apprehension and incarceration are not necessary aspects in the majority of cases.

Although it is clear that Adler’s possession of the photograph is an unsatisfactory state of affairs for Count Von Kramm, this mystery story does not describe a crime. There is no suggestion that Adler acquired the photograph illegally. Although Count Von Kramm fears the consequences should Adler try to blackmail him, Adler makes no threat with regard to this and, following Holmes’s conclusion to the case, it seems the detective shares the opinion that Adler has no intention of using the photograph as leverage against Count Von Kramm. As stated before, the main puzzle of the story is the challenge for Holmes to get Adler to inadvertently reveal

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40 This list of cases includes short fiction and full-length novels.
where she has hidden her copy of the photograph, rather than for Holmes to try and ascertain Adler’s guilt or culpability.

The reaction stage in Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’ serves two purposes. Primarily this stage is used to describe the environment and pertinent details about where the puzzle is set. The Prefect of the Parisian Police describes this in meticulous detail:

‘The habits of the minister gave me, too, a great advantage. He is frequently absent from home all night. His servants are by no means numerous. They sleep at a distance from their master's apartment, and, being chiefly Neapolitans, are readily made drunk. I have keys, as you know, with which I can open any chamber or cabinet in Paris. For three months a night has not passed, during the greater part of which I have not been engaged, personally, in ransacking the D-- Hotel. My honour is interested, and, to mention a great secret, the reward is enormous. So I did not abandon the search until I had become fully satisfied that the thief is a more astute man than myself. I fancy that I have investigated every nook and corner of the premises in which it is possible that the paper can be concealed.’ (Poe, 1845/1992: 209)

This detailed exposition is a common and necessary aspect of the mystery story, introducing the secondary and tertiary characters (where they occur) and thereby introducing the reader to the parameters of the puzzle that is to be solved. Hammet writes, in the mystery story ‘Arson Plus’ (2001: 2), “We got a city slicker here to catch our firebug for us,” Tarr told his deputy. “But we got to tell him what it’s all about first.” This exposition of the puzzle is integral to the reaction stage of the mystery story. In addition to this description, the reaction phase is also used to develop narrative tension by discussing telling details that usually build to the revelation that will come in the final stage of the story:

‘Why the fact is, we took our time, and we searched everywhere. I have had long experience in these affairs. I took the entire building, room by
room; devoting the nights of a whole week to each. We examined, first, the furniture of each apartment. We opened every possible drawer; and I presume you know that, to a properly trained police agent, such a thing as a secret drawer is impossible. Any man is a dolt who permits a secret drawer to escape him in a search of this kind. The thing is so plain. There is a certain amount of bulk --of space --to be accounted for in every cabinet. Then we have accurate rules. The fiftieth part of a line could not escape us. After the cabinets we took the chairs. The cushions we probed with the fine long needles you have seen me employ. From the tables we removed the tops.’ (Poe, 1845/1992: 210)

Monsieur G goes on with this explanation, describing a thoroughness of investigation that leaves little scope for oversight. The description forces the reader to focus on potential hiding places for the purloined letter, so that Dupin can ultimately reveal that Minister D had not troubled himself with a hiding place and had left the correspondence in plain sight.

‘The Purloined Letter’ is the third of Poe’s tales involving Dupin, a series of stories he described as ‘tales of ratiocination’. In ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, this development of narrative tension through telling detail includes Dupin collecting witness accounts that attribute various unrelated nationalities to the overheard voice of the murderer. The suggestion of confusion for the reader is obvious. A Spaniard thinks he is hearing a Frenchman. A Frenchman thinks he is hearing an Italian. An Englishman thinks he is hearing a German. The confusion in this telling detail comes from the idea that all of the witnesses cannot be correct about the nationality of the assailant. In the conclusion of the story it is revealed that the murders have been committed by an orang-utan and the language that had been overheard was not any spoken language but ‘the fiendish jabberings of the brute’ (Poe, 1841/1992: 155). Similarly, in ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’, a story purportedly based on a real murder case, the narrative tension is developed as
Poe catalogues all the reported evidence of the case and describes the hypothesised scenarios that could have occurred to lead to the victim's death (Poe, 1842/1992: 156-205).

Not that Poe is the only author to use telling details in this reaction phase of the typical mystery story. This device is a distinctive feature of the majority of mystery stories and can also be found in 'non-fiction' works such as those from the crime historian John Dunning where, in ‘Bright New Morality’, he presents an account of events surrounding the 1983 murder of Jean-Francois Abram (1988: 20-32). In this narrative the reaction stage is liberally illustrated with salacious details of the incest and open relationships associated with the victim’s family. These details add to the puzzle of this particular mystery story by offering potential motives for the suspects.

The consequences stage of a mystery story invariably includes an explanation of any unaddressed, confusing aspects of the puzzle. This is the stage where, in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, Dupin explains the misunderstanding that has come from the misinterpretation of the orang-utan’s chatter. This is the stage in ‘The Redheaded League’ where Holmes foils the bank robbers who have convinced Jabez Wilson that he has been recruited to an exclusive group of redheads (Doyle, 1892: 29-55). This is also the stage in Gillian Flynn’s ‘What Do You Do?’ where the main character, Nerdy, discovers that there is no supernatural presence in the home where she has been working, and her employer has been trying to exact a diabolical revenge on the house’s owner (2014: 44-70). In the consequences
stage of ‘The Purloined Letter’, Dupin reveals that the letter has been hidden in
plain sight throughout all of Monsieur G’s meticulous searches:

But this is a point, it appears, somewhat above or beneath the
understanding of the Prefect. He never once thought it probable, or
possible, that the Minister had deposited the letter immediately beneath
the nose of the whole world, by way of best preventing any portion of
that world from perceiving it. (Poe, 1845/1992: 220)

This conclusion is a satisfying resolution. The reader is shown how Minister D was
able to outwit Monsieur G, and this is all revealed because of Dupin’s shrewd
understanding of human nature. When Lodge suggests ‘that the short story is
essentially “end-oriented”, inasmuch as one begins a short story in the expectation
of soon reaching its conclusion’, we can assume he was describing this sort of

The material mentioned above, and the notes in this section, illustrate a pattern
that can be seen in the plot of stories usually attributed to the supergenre of the
mystery, where Character A is brought into conflict with the puzzle that is Concept
B, Character A works throughout the story to solve the puzzle, and the resolution
comes when the puzzle has been solved. Once again, this would suggest that
there is some truth to the notion that plot, in the context of the specific pattern of
narrative events, is a component part of genre.

The next chapter presents an example of the subordinate genre of the whodunit,
followed by my analysis of this genre, which has the same pattern as the mystery
story.
Chapter 7: The Whodunit – a basic level genre

i-Dunit (BETA)

“Try the app?” Steve repeated. His tone sat somewhere between disgust and disbelief. “Try the app? Are you serious?”

Thea Butler scowled. “Don’t take that sanctimonious tone with me,” she cautioned. “We have a perfect opportunity here to work out if the app is viable. We have a locked room murder mystery. We can see if this app is a serviceable piece of software without worrying about the influence of the observer’s paradox.” She fixed her withering glare on him and said again, “Try the app.”

“But…”

Steve’s voice trailed off as he tried to catalogue his thoughts and think how to best voice his objections. It was a struggle to know where to begin. It was early Monday morning and they had just discovered Victor Davies’s corpse. Victor had been one of Steve’s two bosses and the company’s co-founder. Victor had been Thea’s business partner and her occasional lover. Victor sat slumped back in his chair, his sightless gaze fixed on the suspended ceiling tiles above. A trail of unpleasant yellow drool trickled from the corner of his mouth. Steve’s objections to Thea’s heartlessness remained unspoken as he shook his head in dismay. Instead of showing any signs of grief, compassion or upset, the woman’s first thought was for them to try the app.

“Try the app,” Thea said again. She snapped her fingers in front of Steve’s face and added, “If you’re too squeamish to use the app, give me that pen and I’ll do it for you. I can beta-test as well as anyone else.”

Grudgingly, Steve pulled the pen from his pocket and opened the i-Dunit app.
The i-Dunit app was a triumph of software engineering that fitted beautifully into the body of an über-bling pen that was fashioned to look like an 18ct gold, diamond encrusted, Caran d’Ache 1010. Whereas most companies were happy manufacturing apps for use on mobile phones and tablets, Butler and Davies crafted their microelectronics so they could be housed in the body of a pen. Images could be displayed on any convenient white surface from a small projector housed near the clip. Input was achieved either through voice control or, as an alternative, a projected infra-red keyboard could be shone onto any flat surface. According to the late Victor Davies, it was a combination of hardware and software that was going to save the company’s fortunes and make Butler and Davies a blue-chip investment who could be of potential interest to Microsoft or Google or some other obscenely rich dot-com-glomerate desperate to buy everyone else’s ingenuity. More importantly, according to all the promotional literature Victor and Thea had written, the i-Dunit app was going to change the face of crime-fighting forever. Police forces throughout the country – possibly throughout the world – were going to want to invest in this game-changing technology.

“What’s it saying?” asked Thea.

He shook his head. “It’s slow to load. Give it a minute.”

Whilst the pen was in his hand, because it was fitted with a SIM card, he considered using it to call the police and notify them of Victor’s suspicious death. Common sense told him it would be the right thing to do. But he restrained from making the call because he knew such an action would slow the loading of the i-Dunit app. If the app performed poorly, that was likely to provoke Thea’s wrath and everyone at Butler and Davies tried to avoid provoking Thea’s wrath. She was already scowling at the idea of the programme having a slow load time. He didn’t
want her to think the i-Dunit app had any further end-user issues other than those that had been listed on the most recent bug report. Prudently, he decided the call to the police would wait until after they’d conducted their short test.

He took a moment to glance around the office and tried not to think about his boss’s death. Victor’s office was usually a chaotic state of disarray and unmanageable clutter. The walls were hidden by dusty book shelves and framed certificates of achievement. Half the paperbacks from the shelves of Victor’s office were invariably scattered in piles along his desk and on the floor. Today was no exception. Victor even had one paperback clutched in his lap.

Light came from the fluttering overhead fluorescents. It shone onto Victor’s dilated pupils and glistened from the string of yellow drool. Steve wished the room had a window he could open to rid the room of the scent of death. He didn’t like the idea that he was tasting Victor’s last breath.

“Thank you for using i-Dunit, the premier investigating app.”

The app’s voice was a well-spoken female tone. It had a sufficiently clipped British accent to make her sound educated, professional and uncompromisingly authoritative. The only reported issue with the voice was that occasionally, usually on headwords and proper nouns, it would slip from sounding like a well-educated British woman and go back to the first voice the programmers had installed: a hard-boiled American male.

“Initiating,” the app growled. It shifted to its feminine voice to continue. “As this is the first stage of your investigation, it’s important that you thoroughly photograph the crime scene, starting with the victim or victims and going on to catalogue every other detail in the immediate vicinity.”
When this introductory text had been programmed into the app, Steve thought it had sounded like a somewhat vague instruction. He had argued against the message at the most recent development meeting and explained that typical users would know little about the practicalities of forensic photography. Becky from engineering and Katy from production had both railed against him and insisted the instruction wasn’t vague. When Victor had taken Steve’s side, shouting and threatening unemployment to anyone who disagreed with him, they’d eventually acquiesced and conceded that additional clarity might be useful.

From a miniature projector on the side, the app now shone illustrative diagrams onto a white wall. The diagrams showed the best way to record triangulated scene-of-crime images. The compromise wasn’t the hi-tech development that Steve had wanted for the app. But he realised it was all he had to work with for the moment. He chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip as he started to obey the app’s instructions and used the pen’s camera to take a series of high-res crime scene photographs. Determinedly, he tried to convince himself that he was doing no harm by interfering with the scene of Victor’s death.

He understood Thea’s points about this being a golden opportunity to test the app. To date, software testing for the i-Dunit had involved setting up scenarios from murder mystery novels and seeing if the app could replicate the same solutions identified by the likes of Holmes, Marple and Poirot.

On those first trials the i-Dunit app had crashed a lot during the initiation phase. The engineers thought it was a memory issue because the programme was having to process a lot of visual information. Once the crashing was resolved the app developed an unfortunate habit of blaming any suspect who belonged to an ethnic minority. That had been down to the input of a single racist data input
clerk and, once he was fired, and his input had been deleted, the issue had been resolved. Now it did look like the i-Dunit was ready to be applied to a real murder mystery. But Steve felt sure his actions were violating several laws that dealt with compromising crime scenes. He thought it would be more appropriate for real investigating officers to go over the crime scene, rather than have him clumsily compromise the investigation. He also thought Thea was being cold and unfeeling with regards to Victor’s plight.

“This is what Victor would have wanted.” Thea said the words as though she’d read Steve’s thoughts.

Steve nodded and flashed a smile of false agreement. He felt sure Victor would never have wanted to be dead in his office whilst a beta version of his company’s problematic app was used to investigate his death.

He didn’t bother to say as much to Thea.

The photography was unpleasant work.

Steve didn’t know how long Victor had been dead but the man was already smelling like spoiled meat. It was a sour, gamey stench that reminded Steve of the time his fridge had stopped working whilst he’d been away one summer’s weekend. He’d returned home to find half a carton of milk turning to lumpy cheese, and two packs of processed sandwich ham cultivating a new and rather pungent breed of penicillin.

The smell of that incident had lingered in his nostrils for days. He suspected this stench would stain the inside of his nose for just as long. He was thankful when the app’s guide allowed him to stop taking pictures of the dead man’s face.

He took a couple of snaps of the paperback in Victor’s hands: a battered old copy of *The Door* by Mary Roberts Rinehart. Then he took photographs of the
desk, which housed a keyboard, a box of paperclips, an empty ring-binder and a half-drunk mug of coffee next to the monitor.

The monitor’s screen was stuck on a reboot menu, as though there had been an interruption to its power supply. Steve took a picture. His next photograph captured three numbered yellow post-it notes on the side of the monitor. The numbered post-it notes read: 1. Get the handle for this office door fixed. 2. Steve did IT. 3. Mr Brightside = Thea Butler.

“Photographic evidence acquired,” the app declared in its gruff, Mike Hammer drawl. Shifting back to female British English it added, “It appears as though there has been a murder. You have taken pictures of Victor Davies, aged thirty-five years old.” It pronounced Victor’s name in the man’s voice, reminding Steve that some aspects of the app’s software still needed tweaking. “Victor Davies was the co-founder of Butler and Davies,” the app explained. “Is this correct?”

The infrared projector was offering him YES or NO options. He only hesitated for a moment before selecting YES.

There was a thoughtful pause before the app asked, “Should I deactivate his FaceBook account?”

Steve pressed NO. He didn’t trust the app not to leave a farewell message as Victor’s final status update.

“This is unreal,” Thea said. “How did it recognise him?”

“The app has various permissions that include access to the internet,” Steve explained. “It can see and read social media pages, including Instagram, Twitter and FaceBook pages. From there it simply uses facial recognition software. It has the ability to identify a substantial proportion of the planet’s population.”
Thea nodded, trying to disguise a thin smile.

Steve could understand her excitement. Butler and Davies had tried to write a comprehensive app for crime detection. The previous versions had been uninspiring failures with laughable limitations. But this latest version seemed to exceed all their previous expectations. His gaze met hers and they nodded together as though sharing the same thoughts. This app could likely win them an Apple design award. Munford and Sheaffer, their main competitors in the market for creating a crime-solving app, were never going to match the quality of product they had created with the i-Dunit. This product could seriously be the one that Microsoft or Google bought for a billion or more.

"Deduction," the app announced. "Judging by skin lividity and the condition of the corpse it looks as though poisoning is the most likely cause of death." The app paused as though allowing this information to be digested. "Estimated time of death was around early Friday evening although a coroner’s report will be needed to confirm this figure."

Thea cast a sharp gaze in Steve’s direction. “How the hell does the app know that?”

He grinned. “The app studies the photographs I’ve taken. It uses a series of fairly sophisticated artificial intelligence programmes to render each image. I suspect it’s noted the absence of blood. There are no signs of physical trauma. And so it’s probably picked up on that nasty yellow drool coming out of Victor’s mouth. From there it will likely have deduced poisoning.” He smiled at the Caran d’Ache and said, “There’s some clever stuff going on in the internal mechanics of this app. Hobbs, Michael and Kinky Jo will be blown away when they see what it can do.”
“Yes,” Thea sniffed testily. “You boys have created a great piece of kit. But it hasn’t told us yet who killed Victor. It’s not that good, is it?”

“Information needed,” the app broke in. “I’ll need a list of suspects.”

Thea glared at the phone.

“How intelligent is that app? Did it just respond to what I was saying?”

Steve ignored her questions. He wasn’t sure if it was coincidence that the app had spoken at that point, or if someone on the team had programmed a broad level of sophisticated responses into its interface.

“Suspects,” he said thoughtfully. “I suppose our corporate rivals, Munford and Sheaffer would be at the top of the list.”

“Munford and Sheaffer,” the app repeated.

The projected image displayed a pair of photographs with brief biographies of the managing directors of Munford and Sheaffer. A list of numbers and figures began to scroll up the makeshift screen and Steve realised that the app was illicitly scouring through Munford and Sheaffer’s accounts. He blinked, unnerved that the programme was so efficient and capable.

Thea stepped to Steve’s side. She was studying the images over his shoulder and standing so close he could smell the coffee on her breath that she’d had for breakfast. It was not a particularly pleasant scent. He suspected the coffee might have been an Irish one. But he thought the smell was better than the all-pervading stink of Victor’s death.

“That really is impressive,” Thea said.

Steve nodded agreement. “Becky and Katy are also suspects.”

Thea scowled at him. “Becky and Katy work for Butler and Davies. Why would they want to see Victor dead?”
“You worked with Victor. I worked for Victor,” Steve countered. “Weren’t there times when you wanted him dead? I know there were times when I’d have happily poisoned him and locked him in his office. He could be callous and cold when the mood took him. I’m sorry that he’s gone. But I'm also honest enough to admit it wasn’t always rainbows and happiness in his company and I expect Becky and Katy will have harboured some antagonism toward him.”

Thea’s scowl deepened when the app repeated Steve’s name and then her own. Her anger showed no sign of abating when Steve gave the names of the other Butler and Davies employees: Hobbs, Michael and Kinky Jo. A list of items and numbers began to scroll down the displayed images as the app accessed the accounting records of Butler and Davies.

“Processing.”

“I can’t believe you fed our names into that damned app,” Thea complained. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“We’re suspects, aren’t we?” Steve shot back. “And we want to test this properly, don’t we?”

“Why would we be suspects?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ve been working for Victor for the last five years, so I’ve got five years’ worth of reasons to want him dead. He was a horrible employer. He was a very unpleasant man who enjoyed bullying his subordinates. You’ve been sleeping with him and working with him for the same length of time so it’s likely that you’re equally motivated to see him dead. And, if the rumours about you and Kinky Jo have any truth, then I’d have thought you’d want to use the app to clear your name.”
Her cheeks turned scarlet. The frown lines furrowing Thea’s brow suggested that she didn’t like the idea of being considered a suspect, or having rumours about her and Kinky Jo being made public. But she let the matter pass.

“Information needed. When was Victor Davies last seen alive?”

Steve shrugged and glanced at Thea.

“I saw him on Friday afternoon at about half two,” Thea admitted. “He’d suggested we should hook up over the weekend but he never called me. Now I think I know why.”

“Confirmation needed. Two thirty pm?”

“Yes,” Thea replied. “The office closes at three on a Friday afternoon. I brought Victor a coffee in this office just as I was leaving for the weekend.”

“Deductions complete. I can now confirm the identity of the murderer.”

Thea laughed. She glanced uncertainly at Steve and said, “That sounds a little hasty. How the hell did it work things out so quickly?”

“Perhaps it’s a faster processor chip than we thought?” Steve guessed. “Or maybe this wasn’t the most challenging mystery it’s ever had to face.”

Thea looked like she was going to say something but the app spoke first.

“Revelation. On Friday afternoon Victor Davies was locked in the office where he died. This is evidenced by the discovery of his body and the post-mortem condition of his corpse.”

Steve and Thea exchanged a glance.

“Victor Davies’s drink had been poisoned. The electricity had been cut to his office. But he managed to leave clues.”

“What makes you think his drink had been poisoned?” Thea broke in.

“Why do you say the power had been cut?” Steve asked sharply.
The app fell silent for a moment and then began again. This time the polished British voice spoke with a slow delivery to her words that suggested an undercurrent of impatience. “Explanation. The electricity had clearly been interrupted because the computer is hanging on a reboot screen.”

Steve was ready to argue that point.

Thea waved him silent before he could speak. “And what makes you think the drink had been poisoned?” Her voice was stiff with derision. “You’re a dumb computer app that’s seen a dozen rubbish amateur pics. What makes you think that Victor’s drink had been poisoned?”

“Explanation. Victor Davies’s image shows post-mortem conditions consistent with symptoms of atropine poisoning. Clearly he has been perspiring profusely. His pupils still remain dilated. There has been a shedding of skin from his face, neck and upper trunk. All these signs suggest the ingestion of atropine or a similar toxic substance.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Steve said. “No one on that suspect list would know how to get hold of atropine.”

“Explanation. Atropine is also known as hyoscine, hyoscyamine or scopolamine. Hyoscine is a principal component of the large quantities of eye-drops that were delivered to Butler and Davies offices one week ago.”

“I thought those eye-drops were to help prevent eye-strain,” Steve mumbled.

“Revelation. The drops were ordered by Thea Butler. Payment was authorised by Victor Davies. Delivery was signed for by Kinky Jo.”

“This proves nothing,” Thea said stiffly.
“Informed speculation mode,” the app declared. “If Victor Davies was locked in the office, and aware he had been poisoned, he would have wanted to leave a clue to reveal the identity of his killer or killers.”

“Why didn’t he phone for help?” Steve asked.

“That is a non sequitur. Images show no telephone line within the room. Images show no mobile handset. Victor Davies had no phone to use to call for help.”

Thea sniffed. “Why didn’t he just write a note?”

“That is a non sequitur,” the app replied. “Victor Davies was most probably aware that the murderer could be one of the first people to discover his body. In such a scenario any compromising or incriminating evidence identifying the culprit would almost certainly be removed before it could be seen by a third party.”

“So who did it?” Thea asked.

“Informed speculation mode,” the app insisted. “Suspect lists suggest Munford and Sheaffer would benefit most if Victor Davies’s death stopped the progress of the i-Dunit application and its innovative hardware. The potential profits from a crime-solving app are substantial and make corporate theft a conceivable motive.”

“Munford and Sheaffer did it?” Steve asked doubtfully.

“No. Munford and Sheaffer had no access to the building. Browsing histories and credit card authorisations provide both partners of Munford and Sheaffer with alibis.”

“Then who did it?”

“Informed speculation mode,” the app chimed again. “Several members of staff disliked Victor Davies. Having accessed Twitter and FaceBook accounts for
Becky, Katy and Kinky Jo, I have found seventy-three separate messages making claims like, ‘my boss is an ass’, and ‘Victor Davies is a moron’, and ‘Who the hell does Victor Davies think he is?’

“Are you saying one of those three did it?” Thea asked.

“No,” the app said flatly. “Revelation. Victor Davies left specific clues to the identity of his killer. Victor Davies left clues that he didn’t think would be interpreted by the killer, even if the killer was amongst the first on the scene of the crime.”

“Is this about that post-it note?” Steve asked. He tried not to let his voice shake as he scrolled through the photographs he had taken to find the image of the second post-it note. His fingers were trembling as he enlarged the displayed image to show the words, ‘Steve did IT.’

“That is a non sequitur,” the app told him. “The post-it note says Steve did IT.” Once again, a gruff American man’s voice pronounced the words that were being stressed. “The IT in this case is not a pronoun, it’s an acronym for Information Technology. This has been Steve’s role on the i-Dunit project. This note is not a clue. It is a red herring.”

Steve breathed a sigh of relief.

“So what clues had Victor left?” Thea asked.

Steve could hear steel in the woman’s voice. Her face was darkened with menace. Her patience looked as though it had evaporated a long time earlier.

“Revelation. The first clue Victor Davies left came with the third post-it note: Mr Brightside = Thea Butler.”

Thea shrugged. “I don’t know what that means.”
“Mr Brightside, according to Spotify, was a 2003 release for The Killers. The equation in Victor Davies’s note would seem to suggest that Thea Butler is the killer. Victor Davies’s killer is Thea Butler.”

She sniffed. “That’s it? That’s all the evidence you have? Some shitty note where I’d asked Victor to rip me a track to my i-Phone?”

“Supplementary information,” the app announced. “Victor Davies was clutching a copy of The Door by Mary Roberts Rinehart. This is the confirming clue.”

Steve glanced at Thea.

Thea held up her open palms and shook her head. It was clear that she had no idea what the comment meant. “The pen must be faulty,” she said. “That book title means nothing. I’ve never heard of it.”

“Revelation. Mary Roberts Rinehart was a popular mystery writer from the 1930s. Her stories were successful although somewhat clichéd. The Door was a title that made her notorious for inspiring a familiar cliché in mystery fiction.”

“Is this where the app leaves a dramatic pause?” Thea asked. “Because I think that’s always unnecessary. It reminds me of the X-Factor. It’s kind of irritating. If that’s a feature you’ve written into the app, I’d suggest it gets added to the next bug report.”

“What’s the cliché associated with The Door?” Steve asked.

“Revelation,” announced the app. “Mary Roberts Rinehart’s cliché is: the butler did it.” There was a pause before the app repeated the words in the female voice. “The butler did it. Thea Butler did it.”

Steve stared at Thea.
Thea laughed softly. “I guess the pen needs a lot more testing before we try it again on a live case,” she said lightly. “Do you want to switch it off now and call the police?” She tugged the post-it notes from the monitor and took the book from Victor’s hands. “The app looks like it’s still a long way from solving crimes but I’m sure you’ll be able to get it there eventually.” Picking up the half-drunk mug of coffee and starting out of the office she said, “I’ll just tidy some of these things away from Victor’s desk before the real police officers get here.” Her smile was tight as she added, “We don’t want them jumping to the same erroneous conclusions as the i-Dunit app, do we?”

THE END
Analysis of the Whodunit

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The action phase of the mystery story brings Character A into conflict with Concept B, where Concept B is a puzzle. As is always the case in the mystery supergenre, the conflict comes from ignorance juxtaposed with a need for information. This applies to ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’ which, as a whodunit, is representative of the basic level genre, subordinate to the supergenre of the mystery story, and it therefore has the same syntactic structure. The introduction of the mystery story’s puzzle is relatively straightforward in ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’. The opening of the story involves the two central characters negotiating the ethics of using a crime-solving app to solve a murder mystery puzzle.

Because the structure of the whodunit operates within very limited parameters, the action stage of the plot seldom (if ever) offers any variation on this pattern. The reader is introduced to the central characters; the central characters are introduced to a puzzle; and the reader is made aware that the central character’s solving of the puzzle will be the focus of the subsequent narrative as it moves into the reaction stage.
The action stage of ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’ is set up within the first 215 words, where the reader is introduced to the main characters and it is implied that the central conflict of ignorance against information will be resolved by the use of the crime-solving device that is the i-Dunit app. Character A, Steve in this case, has been brought into conflict with Concept B: the puzzle that is the identity of Victor Davies’s murderer. This swift setup is typical of the mystery supergenre, and particularly common in the basic level genre of the whodunit. For example, ‘The Tale of the Three Apples’ comes from One Thousand and One Arabian Nights, and is described by author Paul McMichael Nurse as ‘the earliest surviving example of a murder mystery’ (2010: n.p.), whilst author M. M. Owen goes even further, citing it as ‘archetypal of the modern ‘whodunit” (2013: 1). The action stage of ‘The Tale of the Three Apples’ is completed within a single page, when the Wazir, Ja’afar, is charged with identifying the person responsible for the murder of a recently discovered body. To reiterate the characteristics of the mystery plot’s action stage: Character A is brought into conflict with Concept B where, in this instance, Ja’afar is Character A and the puzzle of the murderer’s identity is Concept B. Similarly, the setup of the action stage is managed before the end of the second page in the Miss Marple story ‘Tape Measure Murder’, from Miss Marple’s Final Cases, when Miss Politt and Miss Hartnell discover the recently murdered body of Mrs Spenlow (Christie, 2008: 33-45). This introduction of a murder, and the implicit understanding that the story will follow the investigation into who is responsible for the crime, is as much as is needed to begin this classic example of a whodunit. Although Miss Marple is not introduced in the first two pages of this narrative, the fact that she is named in the collection’s title suggests that she will be Character A
and, as is customary for the whodunit, the puzzle of the murderer’s identity is Concept B.

As has been said before, more than any other area, the reaction stage of a typical plot defines its relationship with a specific genre and this is particularly true of the mystery story. A mystery story without a puzzle at its heart is not a mystery. In ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’, as had occurred in ‘Quid Pro Quo’, the reader is given clues to help solve the puzzle presented in the action stage. The reader is introduced to potential suspects, such as Thea and Steve, as well as Munford and Sheaffer; and given clues, such as the Post-it note referencing the Mr Brightside song, as well as the novel by Mary Roberts Rinehart. This presentation of relevant information (conflicting with the reader’s ignorance of the details contained within the narrative) is contained within the construction of the story and comes alongside erroneous information, such as the names of tertiary characters and irrelevant description, all of which gives a clearer idea of the storyworld being depicted.

Similarly, during the reaction stage of ‘The Tale of the Three Apples’, narrative tension is increased by relatively unimportant developments such as Ja’afar being threatened with capital punishment if he fails to find the murderer, or by various characters approaching him and claiming responsibility for the crime. These details are described as relatively unimportant because, although they are obviously important to characters such as Ja’afar, they contribute little to the eventual identification of the murderer. Other details revealed in this reaction stage not only serve to elaborate on the structure of the world being described,
developing the immersive quality of the story, but they also provide information to dispel the ignorance that is causing the narrative’s central conflict.

The same points can be made for the reaction stage of ‘Tape Measure Murder’, where a husband’s indifference and the victim’s skimpy attire (a kimono) are used to suggest that the murder has been a crime of passion. Mention of spiritualism, potential adultery and other deliberate distractions serve only to make the story seem more convincing whilst providing a glut of information. However, aside from the detail of a long-forgotten robbery and a pin in the lapel of a police constable’s tunic, the majority of narrative detail in the reaction stage of ‘Tape Measure Murder’ is of little help in resolving the story’s puzzle.

In a whodunit, the consequences are provided by a satisfactory resolution to the puzzle. In ‘The Tale of the Three Apples’ this comes when Ja’afar identifies a slave as being responsible for the misunderstanding that resulted in a husband murdering his wife. The consequences in ‘Tape Measure Murder’ come with Miss Marple’s revelation that the murderer was the seamstress who discovered the body, silencing her former partner in crime in order to try and maintain the secrets of their shared nefarious past. The consequences of the typical mystery story are apparent in ‘Quid Pro Quo’ and ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’, although neither explicitly states the successful resolution of Concept B. In ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’, after the i-Dunit app has offered a reasonable explanation to the identity of the culprit, the reader is left to make the connection between Thea Butler’s words and her actions:

Picking up the half-drunk mug of coffee and starting out of the office she said, ‘I’ll just tidy some of these things away from Victor’s desk before the real police officers get here.’ Her smile was tight as she
added, ‘We don’t want them jumping to the same erroneous conclusions as the i-Dunit app, do we?’

All of which is iterated here to show how the whodunit is a typical subordinate example of the superordinate mystery genre, following the same stages of action, reaction and consequences. Action: Character A is brought into conflict with Concept B. Reaction: Character A uncovers the puzzle presented by Concept B. Consequences: Concept B is resolved.

As has been mentioned previously, the whodunit is typically characterised by the discovery of a murder in the action stage. Character A is usually the story’s detective and Concept B is most commonly presented as the puzzle to the identity of the criminal. It is worth noting that, sometimes, the identity of the culprit is not the main preoccupation of the detective, as illustrated by events in ‘The Tuesday Night Club’, the first mystery in Agatha Christie’s *The Thirteen Problems* (1932: 6-16). This is a collection of short stories, presented under the unifying conceit of guests attending a dinner party, with each one taking turns to share a whodunit mystery for the others to solve. Miss Marple is in attendance and demonstrates her shrewd abilities in the area of the whodunit by correctly solving each puzzle ahead of the other guests.

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41 Murder is not the only criminal act used as a plot device in the whodunit. However, because of its severity, it remains one of the most dramatically compelling.
42 This is not to say that Character A needs to be an official detective in the whodunit or in the typical mystery story. Although they are celebrated for their abilities to solve crimes, and their services are sometimes engaged by appropriate authorities, Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, Nancy Drew, Lord Peter Wimsey and a host of other fictional detectives are detectives only because they are involved in investigating a narrative’s mystery. The title detective used here is only suggestive of a character’s function within a story and is not indicative of official status.
In the first story, whilst all the guests are convinced that the murder has been committed by the deceased’s husband, Miss Marple deduces that the poison was administered as an addition to the hundreds and thousands that had been sprinkled on the top layer of the trifle. The murderer is dining with his intended victim and another dinner guest, who is following the restrictions of the Banting diet. In the kitchens, acting on instruction from the victim’s husband, the servant Gladys Linch has added arsenic to the hundreds and thousands. This meant the husband could simply scrape the offending poison from his own trifle but devour the rest of the dessert to avoid arousing suspicion. Because the other diner was dieting, the husband had felt confident she would not consume the final course. Consequently, Gladys Linch was able to administer the poison to her intended victim with comparative accuracy. In this story, although Gladys Linch is technically the murderer, the focus of the villainy remains on the victim’s husband: the man who had persuaded Gladys to commit murder.

However, aside from mild deviations from the norm, where the story focuses on accomplices or the subtle variations of the howdunits and the whydunits, the purpose of the typical whodunit is usually to describe a serious crime, introduce a series of suspects, and present sufficient information so that the story’s detective, or at least the reader, can deduce the identity of the criminal(s) responsible.

This pattern can be seen in many of Doyle’s short stories such as ‘The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet’, where Holmes is charged to ascertain the identity of a thief from a small ensemble of characters (1892: 253 - 279), or ‘The Reigate Puzzle’, where Holmes happens upon a murder mystery whilst recuperating in the
countryside (1893: 87 - 102). During the action stage Holmes (Character A) is introduced to the crime (Concept B). In the former story a beryl coronet has been stolen from a pawnbroker. In the latter a coachman has been murdered on a neighbouring estate to the one where Holmes is recuperating. The reaction stage of both stories introduces all the suspected characters and elaborates on the various clues. The consequences of both stories are Holmes’s revelations of the identities of those responsible.

As with all stories, regardless of genre, there is scope for the pattern to vary slightly. In ‘The Man in the Passage’, G. K. Chesterton introduces the potential suspects before revealing that a murder has taken place and that Father Brown is on hand to identify the culprit (2014: 244 - 260). In this story, this slight shift in the presentation of events does not stop the action stage from being the discovery of the murder. The reaction stage, ordinarily used for introducing the characters, is simply used in this story to elaborate on each character’s involvement in the narrative and discuss their potential motives.

Possibly because the pattern is so familiar to readers, many writers exploit the conventions to try and make the revelation of the criminal all the more surprising. In ‘The Amazing Spiderman’, the whodunit is introduced when a scientist has been murdered whilst working on the creation of a criminal database computer designed to catalogue all ‘Worldwide Habitual Offenders’. When, at the end of the story, Spiderman has discovered that the computer became self-aware and murdered its creator, he muses, ‘Hey, whaddaya know? I spent the night hunting a murderer and… W. H. O. dunnit!’ (Wein, 1976: 1 - 18).
As with all genre patterns, the familiar aspects of the whodunit can be applied to media other than short narrative fiction. The whodunit was the central plot for the majority of episodes of the Hannah-Barbera cartoon series, *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (1969 – 1971) and is still regularly used as a staple plot for episodes of many contemporary TV detective series such as *Castle* (2009 – 2016), *CSI* (2000 – 2015) and *True Detective* (2014 – 2018).

Also, because the plot parameters of the prototypical whodunit are an aspect of the syntactic part of the genre, suggesting that the structure of the story is very similar in each instance, the use of alternate semantic aspects allows this plot to be adapted to fit other subordinate genres. Thus, *The Cadfael Chronicles*, which are semantically historical fiction because of their descriptions of monastic and political life in twelfth century England, include the syntactic aspects of the whodunit (Peters, 1977-1994). Similarly, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* whilst usually considered a part of the science-fiction oeuvre, is syntactically a whodunit mystery set in a semantic world of advanced technology and artificial intelligence (Dick, 1968). This distinction between the semantic content and syntactic structure of a genre is better exemplified in the following pages where the differences are illustrated by various incarnations of the adventure story.
Chapter 8: The Adventure Genre

Buried Treasure

You are one of several people sitting before a solicitor. You are in the room that was your late Uncle John’s home office. It’s a sombre day because you’re attending to hear the reading of Uncle John’s will. Uncle John was one of your favourite relatives. He made his vast fortune from writing Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories.

Do you attentively reflect on your surroundings and the incongruities and peculiarities of all the other beneficiaries? (GO TO SECTION A). Or do you tell the solicitor to hurry the fuck up? (GO TO SECTION B).

SECTION A

The walls bear framed covers from Uncle John’s many adventure stories. The room is dominated by a large old-fashioned desk that takes up half the room. Behind the desk sits the small, bespectacled solicitor.

The other half of the room is crowded.

Aside from being a popular writer, Uncle John was something of a ladies’ man. It’s been suggested this is what probably killed him. Your parents had always advised you to never eat at his house, especially not anything from the fruit bowl. Your mother always said he had more STIs than readers – and she made this remark after Uncle John had been on the NYT Bestsellers list. Your father claimed the coffee at Uncle John’s house tasted of rohypnol.

Many of the female beneficiaries are dressed in black. Some of them are sniffling into delicate, lace-edged handkerchiefs. Most of them are giving evils to
each other through smudgy eye makeup as though only one of them is entitled to feel bereaved.

The most obviously upset is Dorothy.

Dorothy had been Uncle John’s off-again on-again girlfriend for the best part of a decade. She’d been living with Uncle John and putting up with his peculiar ways for the past five years. It’s widely known that she has forgiven more unforgivable indiscretions than the last three Popes. With jet black hair and jet black eyes and a jet black dress she looks like she’s auditioning for the role of Morticia Addams. Her lips are thin. Her eyes are tired and bloodshot. And she’s glaring at the redhead wearing skin-tight leather pants.

The redhead is deliberately ignoring Dorothy. It’s likely the redhead was the most recent of Uncle John’s indiscretions. If there is any truth in the stories about his body being found in a wardrobe, with a shoelace round his balls and an orange up his arse, then it was probably a wardrobe in the redhead’s house. Even though she looks the sort who would introduce citrus fruit to sphincters, her tears look genuine.

There aren’t many men in the solicitor’s office.

You’ve met Tommy before. Tommy was Uncle John’s simple best friend. He’d read all of Uncle John’s Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories and proudly told anyone who’d listen that each new title was another book all about him and his exploits. You suspect the scars on Tommy’s forehead are the results of corrective surgery that was possibly too invasive.

You also recognise Uncle Jack, Uncle John’s brother. Uncle Jack is a police officer although he inspires no trust. He’s the type who will likely one day have to take early retirement under the embarrassing cloud of a bribery accusation, or the
discovery of his improper involvement with a cache of controlled substances.

Uncle Jack keeps glancing at his watch.

You clear your throat, ready to tell the solicitor to hurry up.

SECTION B

Before you can speak Uncle Jack shouts, “Hurry the fuck up, man. We haven’t got all day to put up with you and your fannying around.”

A handful of those gathered chastise Uncle Jack for his coarse turn of phrase but there seems to be a consensus that the solicitor has been fannying around. Suitably motivated, the solicitor polishes his wire-framed glasses and then begins to read out the contents of Uncle John’s will.

Do you listen attentively to the final will and testament of your beloved relative? (GO TO SECTION C). Or do you doze for a while and come back to your senses when you hear your name being mentioned? (GO TO SECTION D).

SECTION C

The solicitor skims over the material with unseemly efficiency. He swiftly blah-blah-blahs his way through the ‘hereby bequeaths’ and ‘direct my executors’ so those gathered don’t get bored with the long words and technical details of the legal jargon.

It’s a relief to hear Uncle John has done the right thing by Dorothy. This is a relief because Dorothy would have kicked off if she’d felt slighted and, although she looks like Morticia Addams, the woman is known to have a mean right hook. Uncle John has given her the house they shared and a substantial portion of the money from his estate. It’s a generous bequest.
There are small bequests for several of the female beneficiaries attending. These have the unpleasant feel of being achievement awards handed out in return for sexual accomplishments.

“The contents of my wine cellar go to Betty,” the solicitor reads from Uncle John’s will. “And I hope she gets as much pleasure from swallowing what’s there, as she seemed to get from swallowing everything I gave to her on the special Saturdays we shared together. She really should show others the trick she can do with a wine cork.”

Betty has the good grace to blush.

Dorothy glares at the woman and squeezes her knuckles into a fist.

“My pair of Georgian tea sets are to be shared between Agatha and Gertrude,” the solicitor continues.

Agatha and Gertrude stiffen in their seats. Their smiles are guarded.

“I had plenty of proof that they’re both very capable of sharing,” the solicitor reads. “And I like to think they’ll get as much satisfaction drinking from a Georgian tea set as they got from drinking from each other’s furry cups.”

The solicitor continues reading the bequests. He gives signed first editions to someone called Natalie, allocates the royalties and merchandising from his books to Tommy and bequeaths John’s garage of classic cars to Uncle Jack. Then he mentions your name.

SECTION D

When you hear your name being mentioned you start in surprise. It appears Uncle John has left you a pen. At first you feel justifiably disappointed. You’re in a room full of people who have been given gifts of substantial financial value and all you’re
getting is a shitty pen. Yes, he was a writer. And there’s likely some sentimental attachment to the bequest of a writer’s pen. But sentimental attachment has never paid anyone’s rent. More importantly, he was also a drunkard and undoubtedly had as much emotional attachment for the contents of the wine cellar that he gave to blowjob-Betty. Whilst you’re thinking that you’ve drawn a very short straw in the scheme of things, you listen to the grumble of discontent that rumbles around the room. There are several muttered voices suggesting you don’t deserve such a substantial gift. You begin to wonder if the bequest of a pen is quite as shitty as you’d first feared.

“It’s a Caran d’Ache 1010,” the solicitor explains. He hands over a chunky black box. “It’s one of an extremely limited edition,” he goes on. “It’s made from solid 18ct gold. The clip is set with a VVS diamond. It’s been conservatively insured at a value of £100,000.”

If an artist could draw you in this moment, your face would look like a cartoon character with dollar signs in the eyeballs. An expensive pen now sounds like a bequest worth having. You’re already trying to decide what sort of auction listing it should have when you put it for sale on eBay.

You open the chunky box and look inside.

Although you’re not an expert on pens, you immediately deduce that this is not a Caran d’Ache 1010. The pen that sits in the box is a scabby looking Bic biro with a yellow stem and a blue plastic end. There’s a dribble of runny ink on the ballpoint nib. The blue plastic end has been chewed.

Do you demand to know who’s stolen your pen? (GO TO SECTION E). Or do you resolve to find out what has happened on your own? (GO TO SECTION F).
SECTION E

"Who the fuck stole my pen?" you demand.

The solicitor asks you to explain what you mean. You show him the box and he looks puzzled. The solicitor asks Uncle Jack for advice in his capacity as a police officer.

Uncle Jack says he’s off duty.

Tommy examines the Bic and says he doesn’t think it’s a Caran d’Ache.

Dorothy and the redhead are shaking their heads. The other beneficiaries are grumbling together. The solicitor says it’s all very odd but offers no helpful suggestions. Your bequest was the last item on the list. The solicitor is already packing his paperwork back into his valise and preparing to leave.

SECTION F

“Fine,” you declare dramatically. “I’ll find out what’s happened on my own.”

Storming angrily from the room you waylay one of the house servants and ask to be taken to Uncle John’s safe. It makes logical sense that, if Uncle John had a very expensive pen he might keep it secured in a safe. If not, you intend to turn the house upside down in your endeavour to find the £100,000 pen you’ve been bequeathed.

The servant takes you to a room on the upper floor and points to a wall safe.

It’s locked.

Do you talk with the servant about your late uncle? (GO TO SECTION G). Or do you tell the servant to fuck off and leave you to breaking the safe? (GO TO SECTION H).
“Your Uncle John is lucky to be dead,” the servant says.

The comment surprises you. “Lucky?”

“There’s not a lot of love in this house,” the servant explains. “There’s not a lot of love in this family.”

You think of all the women who were mourning Uncle John’s passing and start to argue the point.

The servant waves aside your protests. “John’s best friend was a blackmailer. His brother was trying to squeeze money out of him. His girlfriend was getting ready to leave him.”

You raise a sceptical eyebrow. “Do you have proof of these things?”

“There’s proof in John’s office.” Before you can say anything the servant adds, “In John’s real office.”

You digest that piece of information. You’re sure it’s important.

“John died at the right time,” the servant explains. “If he’d left it a week longer he would be so miserable now.”

It’s a moot point. You’re not sure Uncle John is better off being dead than unhappy. You ask, “Are you suggesting there might have been foul play involved with his death?”

The servant laughs at the idea. “Not from that lot.” He nods toward the door and says, “They’re scavengers, not predators. John’s death was relatively natural. Well, as relatively natural as autoerotic asphyxiation can get. These vultures just stayed close to him so they could strip the meat from his carcass.”
He gives you a considered scowl and says, “These are the sort of vultures who will start riffling through his possessions in search of a pen they want to flog on eBay.”

SECTION H

“Fuck off and leave me to work on the safe,” you tell the servant.

Obligingly, the servant fucks off.

The safe is no challenge to someone blessed with your unconventional skills and you easily crack it. Inside you find only a photograph of Uncle John laid in his coffin. It’s a Polaroid snapshot and you wonder why someone would take a picture of your dead uncle and secure the photograph inside a locked safe. In the image he looks resplendent in a Harris Tweed blazer. You are saddened to think you’ll never again be able to enjoy Uncle John’s company and you feel disappointed that his memory is now tainted by the reprobates currently scavenging for morsels from his estate.

Do you go through all the drawers on your uncle’s desk? (GO TO SECTION I). Or do you search the bedrooms on the upper floors. (GO TO SECTION J). Or do you examine the secret doorway in the upper hallway that leads to Uncle John’s secret office? (GO TO SECTION K).

SECTION I

There is nothing in the drawers.

SECTION J
There is nothing in the bedrooms except for a handful of used and unsettlingly sticky sex toys that you didn’t want to encounter. What the hell was wrong with that man’s libido? You find a banana in one bedroom but, although you’re hungry, you know better than to be tempted by such forbidden fruit.

SECTION K
You’ve known about the secret doorway since you were a child. Uncle John, as well as having the well-appointed office where the solicitor was earlier holding court, also had a second office.

The passageway to this office begins through a secret doorway, disguised as a wall of library shelves. You clamber down a spiral staircase that is dark and festooned with cobwebs. Unable to find an electric light switch you have to use the flashlight app on your smartphone.

At the bottom of the staircase you discover your uncle’s secret office. This is where he used to do all of his writing. It’s a cosy little room with bookshelves, comfortable chairs and a soot-blackened fireplace. You find notes on the next series of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories he was planning to write. None of them sound particularly interesting. You also find some important-looking correspondence on his desk.

Curious, you read through the materials.

There are three documents.

The first item you find is a note that says, “Give me ten grand or I’ll go to the police.” You’re not an expert on handwriting but you think this looks like it was written by Tommy. It helps your impromptu investigation that Tommy has signed the bottom of the note.
The second item is a set of legal papers. A post-it note on the front of them says: “I’ve had enough of your philandering, you bastard. I’m leaving you and I want half of everything you own.” Dorothy doesn’t need to have signed the note for you to know that’s from her.

The final item you find is a revised will. The date on the top of the will was the same date that Uncle John died. It’s signed and witnessed and succeeds the will that has just been read. After briefly scanning through the document you see that there is no mention of Tommy being bequeathed royalties. There is no mention of Uncle Jack being the recipient of a garage of classic cars. And there is no mention of Dorothy being given the bulk of John’s estate. There is however, a final line in the will where Uncle John says he wants you to have the Caran d’Ache 1010.

Do you go back to the solicitor and demand he reconsiders the will in light of this discovery? (GO TO SECTION L). Or do you keep these details in mind as you try to get answers from the individual beneficiaries? (GO TO SECTION M).

SECTION L

The solicitor has already left when you return to Uncle John’s office. The only people remaining are Uncle Jack, Tommy, Dorothy, Betty and the redhead. Uncle Jack is chatting with Betty. She doesn’t seem interested in him, although she’s showing off a trick where she manages to suck the cork from an unopened wine bottle. If your investigation wasn’t so pressing you’d stand around and watch. The sight makes Uncle Jack squirm.

SECTION M
You approach the redhead. She’s one of the few people who seem genuinely upset by Uncle John’s death. You remember she was bequeathed signed first edition copies of Uncle John’s books. You comment on how thoughtful this was. She doesn’t appear particularly impressed.

“Choose-your-own-adventure stories are for losers,” she says.

Do you agree? (GO TO SECTION N). Or do you ignore her and interview Dorothy? (GO TO SECTION O).

SECTION N

The redhead’s name is Natalie. She and Uncle John had been involved in a sexual relationship but she says it was only physical. There was no emotional or spiritual commitment. It was only depraved, unwholesome and yet surprisingly satisfying sex.

“Do you know what he might have done with my pen?”

Natalie shrugs. “He was an old pervert. If I was looking for something that shape and size, I’d start exploring his arsehole first.”

SECTION O

Dorothy wants to know why you were talking to the redhead. When you ask her about the pen she says it was in the box the last time she saw it. She refuses to say anything further, other than reminding you that you should be grateful you were mentioned in the will. All the time she’s speaking, Dorothy is curling her lip and glaring at Betty.

Do you go and interrupt Uncle Jack and Betty? (GO TO SECTION P). Or do you talk with Tommy? (GO TO SECTION Q).
SECTION P
Uncle Jack tells you to piss off. He says, if you keep trying to interrupt him whilst he’s making a play for blowjob Betty, he’ll find some way of having you arrested so you spend the night in the cells. When you query the validity of this claim, Uncle Jack assures you he’s had it done before. He makes sure Betty hears this comment and she finally begins to start listening to him.

She holds a freshly sucked cork between her lips and winks at him.

Uncle Jack winks back.

SECTION Q
You go to Tommy and ask him why he was blackmailing your uncle. Tommy tries to deny this but you eventually sway him with a reasoned argument, and by showing him the paperwork he’d signed.

“I’m just trying to find the pen my uncle left me,” you explain.

“What does it look like?”

“Gold with a diamond on the clip.”

Tommy seems to think he’s seen something similar recently. But he can’t quite bring it to mind. He’s known to have memory problems. The scars on his forehead throb dully when he frowns in concentration. Tommy takes your mobile number and promises he’ll call you if he remembers.

You hear screams coming behind the secret doorway. Dorothy is nearby and you ask her what the noises might be.

“It sounds like your Uncle Jack having an orgasm,” she says nonchalantly.

Do you ask her how she knows? GO TO SECTION R. Or do you figure that’s TMI and move on with you investigation? GO TO SECTION S.
SECTION R
“Your Uncle John wasn’t the only one who enjoyed playing away from home,” she explains. “Uncle Jack called here regularly whilst your Uncle John was out visiting those skanky bitches who were here earlier.” Defensively she adds, “I’m only human. And there were times when I needed the cobwebs clearing out.”

SECTION S
You run down the stairs and find Uncle Jack is just pulling his pants back up. Betty is swigging from a bottle of wine as though trying to remove an unpleasant taste from her mouth.

Uncle Jack demands you give him the revised will. He wants to destroy it.

Do you feign ignorance? (GO TO SECTION T). Or do you tell him you have it? (GO TO SECTION U).

SECTION T
“What will, Uncle Jack?”

“The one sticking out of your jacket pocket.”

You glance down and see that a scroll of paperwork is protruding from your pocket. Words on the top of the document, and clearly visible to Uncle Jack, read: LAST WILL AND-

SECTION U
“OK,” you admit. “I have the will. And, whilst I don’t care about how this affects others, I do want the pen I was bequeathed.”
“I’ll tell you what,” Uncle Jack says. “If you give me that will, so I can destroy it, I’ll help you find your pen.”

Do you refuse? (GO TO SECTION V). Or do you give him the will?” (GO TO SECTION W).

SECTION V

“You’re not having the will, Uncle Jack.”

“Very well,” says Jack. “I’ll have you arrested now. When you get strip searched before being thrown in the cells, I’ll be able to take it out of your possessions.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I’m a corrupt policeman,” he reminds you. “I do that on a regular basis.”

SECTION W

“Very well,” you say. “I’ll give you this will in exchange for the Caran d’Ache.”

Uncle Jack takes the will and throws it into the fireplace. He lights it and, whilst the evidence burns, he leads you up the stairs to Uncle John’s safe. The room looks exactly the same as you’d left it. The safe door is open.

“It was in here,” Uncle Jack explains.

“It wasn’t here,” you tell him. “I opened that safe earlier and the only thing in here was this photograph.” You show him the picture of Uncle John resting in his coffin.

Uncle Jack looks genuinely perplexed.

Tommy appears in the doorway. “You found the picture,” he smiles.

“You left it there?” Jack asks.
Tommy nods.

You ask, “What was the photograph doing in the safe?”

“I put it in there to show what I’d done with John’s pen,” Tommy explains. He smacks his forehead in surprise and says, “That’s where I’ve seen the pen before. Now I remember.”

The comment puzzles you until you look more closely at the picture. There is a pen in the breast pocket of Uncle John’s Harris Tweed. It is a gold coloured pen and has a VVS diamond on the clip.

“You put a £100,000 pen in a dead man’s pocket,” you exclaim incredulously.

“He’s an idiot,” Uncle Jack reminds you. He regards Tommy with contempt. “Of course he did that.” With a sarcastic sneer he adds, “You don’t think he just put the pen there and then took a photo of it so we all thought the pen was buried, did you?”

Do you threaten Uncle Jack and Tommy with repercussions if they don’t help you to get your pen back? (GO TO SECTION X). Or do you try to find a legitimate way to start the legal processes for an exhumation? (GO TO SECTION Y). Or do you go into the graveyard at midnight and illegally dig up your uncle’s corpse? (GO TO SECTION Z).

SECTION X

“Uncle Jack,” you begin. “I swear to God, if you don’t help me get this resolved I’ll-”

Uncle Jack punches you in the nose before you can finish your threat.
“You’ve got nothing on me,” Uncle Jack says coldly. “And if I ever hear you talking as though you do have something on me, I’ll make sure you’re behind bars where no one is going to listen.

Uncle Jack storms out of the room. Tommy goes with him.

SECTION Y
You call the solicitor and explain that the pen has been buried with the deceased.

“That’s unfortunate,” the solicitor says.

“How do I get it back?”

“You don’t,” the solicitor says. “The cost of such an action would be prohibitive. There would be the cost of a disinterment, which includes the legal costs, the parish charges and the labour charges. I don’t doubt the local church would fight the case and they’d have a pretty strong position. You’re talking about removing a pen from a writer’s last resting place. Even if you did get permission, and it all went through smoothly, it would take the best part of six months before you got the pen back and then you’d need to sell it immediately to cover all the costs you’d built up.”

Frustrated by this development you close your eyes and try not to moan in despair. “As my uncle’s former solicitor,” you begin patiently. “What would you suggest I do?”

The solicitor lowers his voice to a whisper. “Have you got a shovel, and some sort of flashlight app on your smartphone?”

SECTION Z
It’s midnight. You’re in a graveyard with a shovel and you’ve been digging for the past three hours. Fortunately it’s autumn and not many people choose to visit a cemetery in the middle of an autumn night.

The night would be cool but the exertion of shovelling six foot down has helped to keep you warm. The sounds of owls and faraway traffic were making you nervous at first but now you’re no longer worried.

You finally get through to the coffin.

It takes a little while longer to clear away enough earth so you can lift the lid but you eventually move it and find your dead uncle laying there. You switch on your flashlight app and shine it on the breast pocket of your uncle’s suit. There is nothing there.

You remember a comment that Natalie made earlier. “He was an old pervert. If I was looking for something that shape and size, I’d start exploring his arsehole first.”

Is that where you’re meant to start searching now? The idea is too horrifying to consider.

You remember another comment from earlier in the day. This one had been made sarcastically by Uncle Jack. “You don’t think he just put the pen there and then took a photo of it so we all thought the pen was buried, did you?”

You wonder if that’s what really happened.

Before you can dwell on the problem any further there are lights shining into the grave where you stand. You see a host of faces gathering in the night sky above the grave’s edge.

Tommy is one of those faces. Uncle Jack is another and you see he is taking notes. Somebody starts to tell you that you’re being arrested. Uncle Jack is
shaking his head with apparent disapproval. The pen he holds to take notes is an elegant gold colour and it looks like there is a diamond on the clip: a VVS diamond.

THE END
Analysis of the Adventure Story and its Associated Plot

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<th>Action</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
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<td>Character A’s goals are set.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buried Treasure</td>
<td>The reader is charged with the task of acquiring an inherited pen.</td>
<td>The reader overcomes all obstacles.</td>
<td>The reader realises that there was never a chance of acquiring the pen.</td>
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Before describing the stages of a typical adventure plot, it is worth briefly considering the word ‘adventure’ and some of the ways in which it has been used to identify genres of fiction. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in its noun form the term means, ‘An unusual and exciting or daring experience’ (2017: n.p.). As a literary marker, James Scott Bell is correct when he says, ‘Adventure stories are amongst the oldest in literature’ (2004: 186). And, whilst Bell goes on to cite *Huckleberry Finn* and *Don Quixote* as early examples of the adventure story, it would not be remiss to include very early narratives such as *Beowulf* or *The Epic of Gilgamesh* under this particular rubric. Each of these stories begins with a character establishing goals: Huckleberry Finn is kidnapped by his father and consequently desires freedom; Alonso Quixano loses his sanity and decides to revive chivalry and bring justice to the world in the guise of Don Quixote; Beowulf responds to a call for arms, vowing to defeat Grendel; and Gilgamesh is shown as an out-of-control character, two-thirds god and one third man, who needs to learn humanity and compassion. Each of these is an adventure story in that Character A
from each narrative encounters a series of experiences or events that present obstacles threatening the satisfactory achievement of goals.

However, and possibly because of the word’s dictionary definition, the word ‘adventure’ has also been used as a synonym for ‘experience’ or ‘story’. Consequently, there are titles such as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, a collection of short stories, most of which are (technically) mysteries rather than adventures. A similar state of affairs is found in Enid Blyton’s *Secret Seven Adventure*, a story that is more closely related to the mystery genre, with its clues and methodical investigation, than the simple drive to achieve rather than fail, which more specifically typifies the adventure genre.\(^{43}\) Equally, Thomas Hardy’s *The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid* is a novella that is more romance than adventure in content; whereas, *The Erotic Adventures of an Alien Captive* (Shaye Marlow, 2015), a collection of sexually charged stories, is more closely associated with the typical erotic plot rather than the adventure plot. Finally, titles such as Balzano’s *Ghostly Adventures* (2008) and Rafe McGregor’s *The Adventures of Roderick Langham* (2017) have more in common with the prototypical horror plot than with the adventure plot (as the latter will be described here). All of this is iterated to point out that, whilst it is acknowledged that some stories are commonly labelled adventures, in the context of this thesis, the adventure plot refers to a specific type of narrative identifiable by the structure of its action, reaction and consequences.

\(^{43}\) Indeed, it is even possible to discuss this adventure story, ‘Buried Treasure’, in terms of the mystery genre because, in the action stage of the story, it does present a puzzle which Character A struggles to resolve through the reaction stage of the story. However, the story is presented and discussed here as an example of the adventure genre because the focus in the reaction stage is on Character A trying to overcome obstacles rather than trying to solve a particular puzzle.
The action stage of the adventure plot is simply that Character A’s goals are set. In ‘Buried Treasure’ Character A’s goals are set within the opening passage:

You are one of several people sitting before a solicitor. You are in the room that was your late Uncle John’s home office. It’s a sombre day because you’re attending to hear the reading of Uncle John’s will. Uncle John was one of your favourite relatives. He made his vast fortune from writing Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories.

Do you attentively reflect on your surroundings and the incongruities and peculiarities of all the other beneficiaries? (GO TO SECTION A). Or do you tell the solicitor to hurry the fuck up? (GO TO SECTION B).

It seems simplistic to suggest that, because of the second-person narrative perspective the reader is assuming the role of Character A. However, because this story is parodying the conventions of the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories, stories which were often marketed with the strapline ‘YOU are the hero!’

It does not seem unreasonable to identify the narrated hero as the reader in these circumstances. Indeed, as the reader was the mystery solver in ‘Quid Pro Quo’ and ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’, it could be deemed appropriate that the reader can also be the adventurous hero in an adventure story.

An adventure story without obstacles in the reaction stage, or with obstacles that are neither addressed nor surmounted through the story, is not really an adventure story. In ‘Buried Treasure’ obstacles are presented in the form of the missing pen and the lack of help to locate the missing pen. When it is revealed that the pen has likely been buried with Character A’s dead uncle, exhuming the body and retrieving the pen becomes another obstacle that needs to be surmounted prior to the resolution. The conclusion to ‘Buried Treasure’ is as follows:

Tommy is one of those faces. Uncle Jack is another and you see he is taking notes. Somebody starts to tell you that you’re being arrested. Uncle Jack is shaking his head with apparent disapproval. The pen he holds to take notes is an elegant gold colour and it looks like there is a diamond on the clip: a VVS diamond.

These consequences provide a satisfactory resolution for readers because they understand that Character A never had a chance of acquiring the bequeathed pen.

The prototypical short adventure plot follows a simple model. Action: Character A’s goal is set. Reaction: Character A overcomes all obstacles. Consequences: satisfactory resolution. The conflict in the adventure plot, as has been stated before, comes from the desire for achievement being set against the threat of failure. Therefore, looking at other stories that fit within the category of the adventure plot, it can be seen that, in ‘Blast from the Past’, the story begins when James Bond discovers his son has been murdered (Benson, 1997). The goal-setting for the action is implicit but apparent: Bond has to apprehend his son’s killer. The reaction stage in this adventure story is Bond’s response to the initial catalyst. In this story Bond has to overcome a series of obstacles to apprehend the killer. The consequences are a successful resolution with the main villain killed and Bond relieved from threat of harm. The conflict is about Bond’s desire to achieve justice for his son, set against the threat of failing to achieve this goal. The same pattern occurs in ‘Long Odds’ (Haggard, 1889/2012). Although this is a framed narration the story follows the aforementioned structure. The action begins with Allan Quatermain explaining how he came to have a lion’s head on the wall of his trophy room. In the reaction phase Quatermain encounters various trials during his attempts to buy ivory from a dealer. The most challenging of these trials is his need to vanquish a pride of dangerous lions. The consequences in this instance
are the death of all four lions and Quatermain’s disappointment at not being able
to buy the ivory he desired. Once again, the conflict comes from the juxtaposition
of Character A’s desire to achieve, set against the perilous prospect of failure. In
‘The Capture of Tarzan’, the action begins when Tarzan witnesses natives building
a mysterious trap (Burroughs, 1919/2012). His goals are clear – he has to find out
for whom the trap is intended. During the reaction phase Tarzan endures various
trials which end in him falling into the trap as he saves his friend, Tantor the
elephant. The consequences of the story have Tantor saving Tarzan. The conflict
comes from Tarzan wanting to achieve safety and security for himself and his
animal friends, set against the dangers that would come from failing in this goal.

It will be noticed here that these three stories feature series characters: Bond,
Quatermain and Tarzan. The concept of the formulaic adventure story is well
suited to an established series character. One potential explanation for this fact is
that the series hero in short fiction needs minimal character growth to avoid
detracting from the focus of the adventure story’s elements of exciting interaction.
Despite the death of Bond’s son in ‘Blast from the Past’, then, the incident has little
impact on Bond’s personality and the conclusion does not suggest he is in any
way changed by this personal dimension of this story. Likewise, Quatermain is
seriously injured by lion attack in ‘Long Odds’ but, by the end of the story, he
remains driven only by his needs as a hunter and his injuries are treated as being
merely superficial. Finally, Tarzan, in ‘The Capture of Tarzan’ has done nothing
more than save a friend and had that favour reciprocated. In each of these series
stories the personality of the central character at the end of the story is not
markedly different from the personality of that same character at the beginning of
the story. Author André Jute argues that such undeveloped characterisations are no longer representative of modern thrillers, the contemporary incarnation of the adventure story:

At the time, it was not thought worth much comment that Bond did not develop as a character through the book or even much over a series of books but it is doubtful if Bond would be such a huge success today. (Jute, 1994:50)

However, the convenience of the established and undeveloped series character remains a prominent feature of contemporary adventure stories. Such approaches can still be seen as typical of series characters in adventure stories, particularly in series comic book stories such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Petrie & Jeanty, 2009), and Richard Castle’s ‘Derrick Storm’ mysteries (Bendis & Deconnick, 2011). The only time this pattern seems to alter, so that the central character is changed by the events of the story, is during the initial narration of a hero’s origin, such as occurs in The Ultimate Spiderman (Bendis, 2007), or Avengers: the Origin (Casey, 2012).

Referring back to Ronald B. Tobias’s aforementioned distinction between plots of forza and forda (Chapter 5: Analysis of the Erotic Genre and its Associated Plot), it

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45 ACTION: Buffy learns her sister is held captive by a supernatural power and she is charged with the task of rescuing her and reuniting Dawn with her former boyfriend. REACTION: Buffy, with the aid of Dawn’s former boyfriend, overcomes various obstacles to rescue Dawn. CONSEQUENCES: Dawn and boyfriend resolve outstanding relationship issues and part amicably; Buffy and Dawn re-establish their strong sororal relationship (‘Living Doll’, Season Eight, issue 25).
46 ACTION: PI Derrick Storm tracks down an elusive missing person, bringing him to the attention of the CIA. REACTION: The CIA, impressed by Storm’s resourcefulness, surreptitiously employ Storm as a freelance agent and set him goals. CONSEQUENCES: Storm proves himself worthy of the CIA challenge, achieving all of the targets they set, and becomes a regular consultant.
47 ACTION: Peter Parker (a powerless character) is bitten by a radioactive spider. REACTION: The spider’s bite gives Parker superhuman powers. CONSEQUENCES: Parker becomes powerful.
48 ACTION: A collective of superheroes are puzzled as to why the Hulk has gone on an unprovoked rampage. REACTION: The collective of superheroes learns that Loki (Thor’s half-brother) was responsible for inciting the Hulk’s rampage. CONSEQUENCES: The collective, along with the Hulk, agree to work together in the future as the Avengers, to address threats like Loki.
will be remembered that he places a similar emphasis on the importance of character growth. After having described the prototypical quest plot, Tobias goes on to define an adventure plot in these terms:

The adventure plot resembles the quest plot in many ways, but there are some profound differences between them. The quest plot is a character plot; it is a plot of the mind. The adventure plot, on the other hand, is an action plot; it is a plot of the body. (Tobias, 1993:80)

Tobias supports this argument after having defined the quest plot using examples such as the previously mentioned Gilgamesh and Don Quixote as well as John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath. These ‘plots of the mind’ are juxtaposed with adventure plots, ‘plots of the body’, such as Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea and The Wind in the Willows. This distinction between the quest and the adventure, whilst appropriate for Tobias’s definitions, is redundant here. Regardless of whether a character learns from the experience, or simply and stoically endures the events from the start through to the finish, the plot remains the same.

All of this helps to demonstrate how the prototypical adventure story is representative of a supergenre, a superordinate syntactic genre that commonly subordinates popular semantic genres such as the thriller, western, science-fiction and fantasy. To further illustrate how subordinate semantic genres fit into this approach, examples of the fantasy and science-fiction story are presented in the next chapter, and are then discussed in tandem.

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49 Tobias identifies twenty separate plots including Quest, Adventure, Pursuit, Rescue, Escape, Revenge, Riddle, Rivalry, Underdog, Temptation, Metamorphosis, Transformation, Maturation, Love, Forbidden Love, Sacrifice, Discovery, Wretched Excess, Ascension and Descension.
Chapter 9: Fantasy and Science Fiction

The Sorcerer

High Minister Arnold placed the pen in a sleek black box and handed it to the sorcerer. The box was decorated with the official gold seal of the Northern Kingdom.

“Your lordship?” The sorcerer was confused. “What’s this for?”

High Minister Arnold waved him silent and closed his hands in prayer. His eyes were wide, as though he was remembering the moment for posterity. The High Minister seemed inordinately fond of detailed memories. Whilst reading the man’s runes before their negotiations began, the sorcerer had caught glimpses of the man’s most cherished reminiscences. He had seen the vivid memory of High Minister Arnold being hugged by the king. He had glimpsed the more salacious image of High Minister Arnold being intimate with the queen. Most prominent in Arnold’s memories was the image of the high minister shaking hands with a military man wearing the dark green uniform of the Frozen Forest guard. Given the fact that High Minister Arnold and the anonymous soldier shared the same broad-chested build and identical lantern-jaws, it seemed safe to guess that this was Arnold and a favoured son.

“Take the pen with you,” High Minister Arnold decided. “Give it to Freya Tyr. It’s our official gift to the scorpion people.”

*Scorpion people.*

The sorcerer winced at High Minister Arnold’s choice of words. ‘Scorpion people’ was not an epithet that any sane man would dare use within earshot of the nomads of the Scorpion Desert. Two lifetimes earlier, embittered by the way their skills were being abused by the monarchy, the Northern Kingdom’s community of
alchemists had left their homes and become travellers on the vast plains of the Scorpion Desert.

They claimed they had been exploited for long enough.

Calling themselves Guardians of the Desert they left the Northern Kingdom and built their own travelling community. The sorcerer had joined the nomads for two summers when learning about alchemy. Although he wasn’t fond of Desert life or travelling, he had learnt to love the nomads and their staunch independence.

Yet the commoners of the Northern Kingdom feared the alchemists and refused to call them Guardians of the Desert. The crueler voices in the royal court began to refer to the nomads as ‘scorpion people’.

The name became a common insult.

And then the rumours began to circulate that the Guardians of the Desert were slaughtering all those who dared call them ‘scorpion people’.

The sorcerer checked the inscription on the pen to assure himself that the words ‘scorpion people’ weren’t tactlessly engraved on the casing. His mission wasn’t particularly sensitive but he didn’t want to run the risk of dismemberment or disembowelling.

He fixed High Minister Arnold with a stiff glare. “They’re not ‘scorpion people’. They’re the Guardians of the Desert.”

High Minister Arnold’s eyes sparkled with ill-natured mirth. “Don’t tell me you’re a scorpion-lover.”

The sorcerer stiffened.

He rubbed at the tension headache throbbing beneath the hooded cowl that covered his neck.
“You’ve asked me to lead my team to a band of nomads who broke all relations with the Northern Kingdom two lifetimes ago,” he said tiredly. “The remnants of the Guardians are working with us. It’s hoped we can share our most effective crystals, unguents and salves in exchange for some of the diamonds that they’ve always been able to make.”

The humour disappeared from Arnold’s eyes. His nostrils curled with the familiar sneer of disgust that the sorcerer had seen on the face of every authority who’d ever called him a scorpion-lover. High Minister Arnold opened his mouth but the sorcerer didn’t allow him to interrupt.

“According to our wise women,” the sorcerer went on, “the dead walk amongst the Guardians of the Desert.”

“Superstitions and lies,” Arnold sneered.

The sorcerer shrugged. “The Scorpion Desert lies at the far reaches of this realm, beyond the Frozen Forest. I have a lot of traveling ahead of me so I’m sure you can understand why I might appear a little fractious.”

If High Minister Arnold felt any sympathy it didn’t appear on his features.

“Are your team ready?”

“There are nine of us. I have two wise women, a psychic and an apothecary, two mystics and a pair of soldiers. Our horses and provisions will be waiting for us this afternoon.”

High Minister Arnold extended a hand.

“Travel safely,” he said. “See if you can save the Scor-” He stopped himself mid-word and flashed an apologetic grin at the sorcerer’s surfacing scowl. “See if you can save the Guardians,” he amended. “And don’t forget to bring back lots and lots of diamonds.”
The sorcerer shook the man’s hand and then departed from the cold stones of his quarters. He left the official’s building quickly because he knew, if he stayed too long in High Minister Arnold’s company, the urge to punch the man would prove irresistible.

They were using military horses and a blue and yellow military troop carrier which allowed them to make the journey in the timeliest fashion. The sorcerer had the passenger seat of their open waggon. Sergeant Sharpe, resplendent in the blue and yellow uniform of the Northern Kingdom’s most decorated Scimitar Battalion, drove their team of four piebald stallions. At the rear of the waggon sat the rest of the team, grumbling quietly to themselves as they speculated on what they would find in the faraway realm beyond the Frozen Forest.

“Why the hell do we have to use military waggons?” The question was called from the apprenticed mystic, Turner. He had the burly build of a fighter and his broad bulk filled the seat immediately behind the sorcerer. His eyes were bawdy-house bloodshot and he slammed one large, meaty fist against the splintered panel of waggon by his side.

The sorcerer flinched as the vehicle creaked ominously with the blow.

“The military personnel carriers are a surprisingly reliable vehicle,” Sergeant Sharpe explained brightly. “This one is large enough to carry all nine of us. Since we’re using the concealed storage drawers it conveys all of our equipment without drawing attention from passing brigands. The structure is sufficiently robust for the most treacherous roads we’re going to encounter on the other side of the Frozen
Forest. In the whole history of the Scimitar Battalion we’ve never had a single military personnel waggon break down.”

The sorcerer tried to relax as they headed out of the grey city walls and entered the rich, verdant farming hills of the Northern Kingdom. He stared at the miles of sky above and tried to clear his thoughts so he could focus on the problems of the Guardians of the Desert.

“I don’t trust these brittle old trucks,” Turner murmured. “You hear horror stories.”

Clenching his teeth and glaring at the sky, the sorcerer said nothing. He could feel the rapid quickening of his heartbeat. When they passed from the farmland to the snowy banks of the riverside, he wrapped his cowl more tightly around himself.

“The Scimitar Battalion are working on sturdier versions of these waggons,” Sergeant Sharpe explained as they drove across a rickety wooden bridge.

The sorcerer could hear the ancient wood groaning beneath the clomp of the horse’s hooves and the strain of the waggon’s weight. He glanced down and saw they were a couple of hundred hand spans above a faraway river. The rushing water below was broken into white froth as it split over unforgiving jagged rocks. The sorcerer tried not to think about what would happen if their waggon proved too much for the flimsy wooden bridge.

“The waggons we’re working on will be larger,” Sergeant Sharpe went on. “They’ll be more reliable and able to carry entire regiments over much greater distances.”

The sorcerer ignored the disquiet of nausea sitting at the back of his throat. It would take a queasy minute or more for Sergeant Sharpe to navigate the bridge.
He steeled himself and tried not to let his distaste for long-distance travel cause further upset. He hid his unease behind a show of interest in Sergeant Sharpe’s comment.

“Long-distance waggons? This first one is going to take us across the realm and beyond. How much further could we manage with long-distance waggons?”

Sergeant Sharpe laughed. “There’s scope to take a battalion anywhere in the kingdom with the new range of waggons. It’s a military manoeuvre that will allow us to conquer the land beyond the southern seas. My commanding officer in the Scimitar Battalion—”

Turner yawned.

It was a sound that was meant to be offensive. When Sergeant Sharpe fell silent, and concentrated on driving the wagon past the decaying turret of a fallen castle, Turner smiled as though he was pleased with himself.

“Are you tired?” the sorcerer asked.

“I’m bored.” Turner spoke the words as though they were a challenge. One of the wise women at the rear of the waggon snickered at his boldness. “If I’ve got to endure a full journey of hearing about the Scimitar Battalion,” Turner went on, “it will be a relief to contract the death-walker’s plague from the scorpion people.”

The sorcerer nodded. Everyone on the vehicle was watching the exchange. He was pleased that he had all their attention.

He smashed a fist into Turner’s jaw.

There wasn’t sufficient room for the sorcerer to deliver maximum force to the blow but he figured he was holding back enough nervous tension to make the punch count.
The impact was hard enough to make a cracking sound. A look of surprise flashed across Turner’s face. And then his eyes rolled to stare upwards and he slumped unconscious into his seat.

“By the heavens,” whispered the apothecary.

Calmly, the sorcerer asked, “Did everyone receive my epistle explaining the rules for this journey?”

There was a hasty murmur of assent.

“Just to be sure that those rules can’t be misinterpreted,” the sorcerer said, “The Guardians of the Desert will not be called ‘scorpion people’ by any member of this expedition. Is that understood?”

McCance, the senior mystic, slipped into the seat beside Turner. He gave his unconscious colleague a cursory examination. “He’s out cold.”

The sorcerer waved the matter aside. Speaking to the rest of the crew he said, “We’re being invited to help a people who’ve had a turbulent relationship with the Northern Kingdom. I don’t care about anyone’s personal politics. I don’t care about anyone’s stupid prejudices. But I will not let this mission be jeopardised by the stupidity of an insult that doesn’t need to be used. Is that understood?”

McCance regarded him doubtfully.

Sergeant Sharpe and the rest of the team grumbled their agreement.

Seeing that the sun still remained high in the sky, not that far from where it had been when they began, the sorcerer realised they still had a lot of distance ahead of them. He winced inwardly as he realised the number of counties they were traversing didn’t satisfactorily convey how long the journey would now feel. He didn’t doubt that each and every one of his companions would now be labelling him as the worst sort of scorpion-lover.
McCance drove on the second day of the journey. Aside from being an ex-military man he had also spent time as a waggon driver and kept a steady hand on the reins of the team as he took them to the edge of the Frozen Forest. The sorcerer was given the reins when they entered the icy world of green shadows.

They stopped at various farmhouses and trading posts to grab short breaks and replenish their food and drink stocks. They spent each night camped beneath the stars with the mystics and the wise women bedding together whilst the psychic, the apothecary and the soldiers kept shifts to watch over the team.

The sorcerer had heard good things about the cuisine at an enchanted inn in the centre of the Frozen Forest and, because it also offered accommodation, he insisted they have one overnight stay there. It was at the enchanted inn where the sorcerer tried to make peace with Turner. He apologised for punching the man and offered his hand.

Grudgingly, Turner accepted the apology. The sorcerer thought he could see flint in the man’s eye. It was an expression that said Turner would be watching for a chance to get even and the sorcerer accepted he would need to be vigilant whilst in the company of the junior mystic.

As if the journey wasn’t already filled with potential dangers.

Aside from occasional breaks, when the geography of the road allowed them the discretion to relieve themselves, the expedition was mostly unbroken and mercifully uneventful. If he’d been asked to describe the moon cycle of their travel, the sorcerer would have said it was interminably long and wholly draining. Frozen
Forest military personnel patrolled the thin, overshadowed roads. Soldiers from the Frozen Forest militia wore a dark green uniform that made them blend into the scenery and effectively camouflaged entire regiments.

But that was probably the highlight of the journey.

The waggon encountered none of the Frozen Forest’s fabled nightcrawlers and only once heard the roar of a faraway dragon cawing for its brethren. One of the wise women claimed she had been visited by a forest sprite in the night but the sorcerer suspected that she was the victim of a prank from one of the mystics sleeping with her.

He was yawning by the time they passed from the green glow of the Frozen Forest to the black expanse of the Scorpion Desert. Even though he needed to be in the driver’s seat, he had handed over the reins to Sergeant Sharpe. After so much time sitting on the flat bench of the driver’s seat, the sorcerer was too tired to focus. He was anxious to stretch his legs and escape from the simmering hostility of his weary team. He desperately wanted to bed down for the night with a caravan of the desert guardians and, hopefully, awake refreshed in a dozen or so hours.

His instincts told him that wasn’t likely to happen.

A cloak of night engulfed the Scorpion Desert.

The apothecary’s lantern, swinging from a strut above the driver’s seat on the waggon, cut brightly through the darkness. A crowd of glaring faces were illuminated on the thin pathway ahead of them. Seemingly angered by the light, they turned away and moved to the sandy edges of the road. They became rippling shadows that shifted at the edges of the dark being cut by the lamplight.

“Sorcerer,” Sergeant Sharpe muttered. “I think you need to see this.”
The sorcerer blinked the sleep from his eyes and tried to make sense of what he was seeing. There was a sea of shifting shadows beyond the lamplight’s beam. He could hear a growl of subhuman voices murmuring as the waggon creaked along the road.

“What the hell is this, Sergeant Sharpe?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.” Sergeant Sharpe stiffened in his seat and the sorcerer could see he was going to pull the reins on the team of horses.

“Keep moving,” the sorcerer insisted.

“But—”

“Keep moving.” The sorcerer said the words with more volume and conviction this time. “That’s an order, Sergeant Sharpe. I don’t think it would be advisable to stop in these conditions.”

He glanced beyond the shadows, looking for some glimmer of light in the night that would suggest the Guardians of the Desert were close to hand.

The darkness was endless and impenetrable.

“Psychic,” he muttered. “I need to talk with Freya Tyr.”

The lamplight picked up the shadows of more shuffling figures scrambling slowly to the sanctuary of their darkness. When the beams fell on individuals they lit a chilling spectre of broken humanity. The features were invariably gaunt and expressionless. Each figure moved with an artless gait that looked painful, awkward and unnatural. The sorcerer stared into the impossibly dark stretches of night that lay beyond the lamp light chilled by the vast expanse of emptiness.

He wondered how many plague victims he was seeing.

He wondered how many victims he wasn’t seeing.

“What the hell is this?” murmured one of the wise women.
The sorcerer ignored her. “Keep driving, Sergeant Sharpe. Keep driving.”

Over his shoulder he called, “Psychic? Have you reached Freya Tyr yet?”

The clomp of horse hooves was muted by the change in the road surface. They moved slowly as the wheels of their waggon dug deep ruts in the sand. They crept through the night with the vast crowds seeming desperate to avoid the touch of the waggon’s lamp beams. Continuously, they were treated to the dull choir of groans and moans.

“Sorcerer?” The psychic’s voice sounded different. “This is Freya Tyr. Where are you?”

“We’ve just arrived on the outer edges of the desert,” he explained. He glanced helplessly at the darkness surrounding them and added, “We left the Frozen Forest via the Jotnar turnpike.”

“My apologies.” The psychic still spoke in Freya Tyr’s voice. “I’d heard that my companions in that caravan were badly affected by the plague. I should have contacted you to explain the situation but there have been so many other—”

“How bad is the situation, Freya Tyr?” The sorcerer could hear his tone was a mixture of incredulity and accusation. He stopped himself from shouting, “And why the hell weren’t we warned about this before we arrived?”

There was a moment’s silence from the psychic.

“Didn’t High Minister Arnold tell you?” Freya Tyr asked eventually. She released a short, sharp bark of laughter. To the sorcerer it sounded like the cry of a woman on the verge of a hysterical breakdown. “This is our plague,” Freya Tyr explained. “The Guardians of the Desert are becoming death-walkers.”

*
The sorcerer handed over the conversation to Sergeant Sharpe as Freya Tyr gave directions that would take the waggon from the camp at Jotnar to their capital at Aesir. Glancing warily into the night the sorcerer saw they were driving past hundreds of individuals, each one shambling aimlessly through the desert. The scene was enough to make goosebumps prickle on his forearms. He glanced into the rear of the van and asked McCance, “What do you know about death-walkers?”

“I’d always thought they were the stuff of folk legend. As real as pixies, elves and forest sprites,” McCance admitted. One of the wise women shot him a spiteful glare. McCance ignored her. “The death-walker illness is a serious condition. These people aren’t walking corpses. But they need treatment.”

“Surely none of us believed they were real death-walkers?”

The sorcerer flicked his gaze to the side of the waggon. A hand slapped against the side of the vehicle making them all jump. He had been about to make a remark dismissing the foolishness of discussing death-walkers as though they were real. Seeing a deathly pale face loom bright in the lamplight he didn’t feel sufficiently bold to discount the concept. The figure pounding on the side of the vehicle could only have been described as a death-walker. Before Turner could kick the creature away, the sorcerer recoiled from the stare of the death-walker’s viciously stupid expression.

“They’re not really the living dead,” McCance said. “They’re just ill.”

The sorcerer wouldn’t allow himself to sigh with relief. He didn’t want his companions to hear any suggestion of his nervousness. He realised his heartbeat was racing. His mouth was dry and he was suddenly aware of the desert night’s chill.
“All they need is bed rest, tea-tree and lavender,” McCance explained. “That works for most conditions. But the problem is treating them as individuals. Together they seem to act with a pack mentality. They present a physical danger to those they encounter because they’ve been known to attack the uninfected.”

Outside a man with a blank staring gaze snatched at their passing waggon. “They do look like the death-walkers from children’s fables,” the sorcerer marvelled.

McCance shrugged. “They’re not the walking dead. But, unless they can be treated as individuals, they might as well be.” He nodded toward Turner and said, “Jim studied treatments prior to us leaving. He can tell you more about them.”

Turner regarded the sorcerer with a blank expression. He was still sitting in the same seat where he’d been positioned when the sorcerer punched him unconscious at the beginning of their journey.

The sorcerer tried to remember why it had seemed like a good idea to demonstrate his authority by punching the mystic. He asked, “Is this situation treatable?”

“It looks bad,” Turner said carefully. He glanced out at the rippling shadows and added, “It won’t be bad for us. It won’t harm us in any way. But this is a pretty serious situation for the scorpion people.”

“I thought I’d warned you about calling them-”

Turner raised a gruffly apologetic hand. “Guardians,” he corrected. “Nomads. Alchemists. Whatever you call them, it’s bad for these poor sods.”

“How bad?”

“Fatal. The illness strips them of any ability to care for themselves. They don’t know how to feed or water themselves. Without treatment they won’t last
more than a couple of days.” He glanced at the crowd surrounding their waggon and said, “I’d guess these guys have been suffering for a lot longer than a couple of days.”

“Are we going to end up like that?” The question came from one of the wise women. Her voice quavered uneasily.

Turner shook his head. “The illness shouldn’t affect us. A generation ago the Northern Kingdom was hit by a plague that caused death-walking. There’s been no reported case of that plague in our lifetime and it suggests our bodies have a natural defence against the condition.”

The sorcerer frowned. “Are you saying there’s no risk?”

Turner shrugged. “There are some depraved mystics who could likely reinvent the disease. But that’s unproven speculation. Whilst it’s possible, I don’t know any mystic who would dare to do such a thing.”

The Sorcerer glared at the shambling hoards that filled the shadows of the Scorpion Desert. He shifted his attention from McCance to Turner.

“It looks like some mystic has dared to do that much,” he grunted.

“If it was a mystic,” McCance countered.

“I’d like to know where this outbreak began,” Turner said. He brandished a parchment chart and added, “I’ll need to talk with Freya Tyr to find out more.”

The sorcerer climbed back into the seat at the front of the waggon and watched as Sergeant Sharpe guided them along a road with signposts for Vanir.

“I thought we were headed to Aesir?”

“We are,” Sergeant Sharpe told him. “But we’re going via the scenic route.”

“How wonderful.”
Freya Tyr’s voice came from the psychic. “The road from Jotnar to Aesir is unpassable.” She sighed heavily and said, “The situation is looking hopeless, sorcerer.”

“Hopeless?”

“We’re down to a tenth of our population. I’m not sure the Guardians of the Desert can survive with such few numbers.”

The Sorcerer was stunned.

Behind him he heard either McCance or Turner whistle in disbelief.

“Freya Tyr,” the sorcerer began. “Are you able to consult with one of our mystics? He has questions about when and where the outbreak began.”

“Of course.”

“And we-”

He got no further. He was going to explain how his instructions were to tackle the death-walkers from two angles. His team of wise women and mystics were going to isolate all those who had so far managed to avoid the condition. His military advisors were going to establish the most appropriate way to keep the uninfected contained and get treatment to those who might make a recovery. He was going to tell Freya Tyr that his plans were to establish a headquarters in Aesir, eradicate the problem from that area, then move treatments through Vanir and finally into Jotnar.

He was in the process of trying to articulate those thoughts when the crossbow bolt smashed into Sergeant Sharpe’s eye socket.

*
Turner’s reactions were incredible.

The sorcerer could see the reward of the man’s cavalry training as he urged the wise women to flatten themselves against the floor to avoid being hit by any further crossbow bolts. McCance had unsheathed a concealed dirk from his hip. It had a sculpted bolster and ornate pommel. He squatted down on his haunches at the rear of the waggon studying every angle. The remaining soldier was arming himself, drawing the customary curved blade that showed him as a member of the Northern Kingdom’s Scimitar Battalion. But, now that Sharpe had fallen, he seemed to look to McCance for leadership.

McCance has a dirk? The development surprised the sorcerer. It also scared him when he realised it was likely that Turner was also armed. Had he punched an armed ex-cavalryman?

Without Sergeant Sharpe’s control, the waggon veered to one side. A single bump, the sorcerer suspected they had driven over one of the death-walkers, and the movement pulled back Sergeant Sharpe’s lifeless hand which was wrapped around the reins.

The horses drew to a whinnying halt.

The waggon stopped moving.

“What the hell is going on?” the apothecary demanded.

McCance pushed him to the floor. “Keep your head down. I want everyone keeping their head down until I’ve established what’s going on here.”

The sorcerer ignored McCance’s instructions. Grabbing hold of Sergeant Sharpe’s shoulder, ignoring the shiver of disquiet that touched him when the man’s damaged head lolled against his arm, the sorcerer pulled Sergeant Sharpe from the driver’s seat.
“You need to keep your head down, sorcerer,” McCance told him.

His voice was stiff with impatience.

Hands grabbed at the waggon. One enthusiastic death-walker scrambled to climb aboard. The upper half of his body was near the driver’s bench before the sorcerer noticed and punched him away.

“Sorcerer’s got a decent right hook,” Turner observed. “No wonder I didn’t see it coming.”

“Keep your head down, sorcerer,” McCance repeated. “We’ve not established the source of that bolt and we’ve not had a chance to neutralise the threat.”

The sorcerer wrestled Sergeant Sharpe’s corpse into the passenger seat and looked up in time to see another death-walker clamouring to climb aboard the waggon. Before the sorcerer could draw his fist back, Turner had stepped to his side and pushed the attacker out into the desert.

“Keep your head down, sorcerer,” McCance insisted. “We have no idea who’s firing at us.”

The sorcerer wrestled the reins from Sharpe’s dead fist and urged the horses to stir. They stamped their hooves and whinnied. The noise was enough to make the crowd of death-walkers move warily back to the shadows.

“Sorcerer,” McCance hissed. “Please get your head down.”

“I’m not getting my head down,” the sorcerer snapped. “I need to get us out of here.”

“But if we’re still under fire-” McCance started.

“We’re not under fire,” the sorcerer broke in. “It was a single shot. It was probably an accident or a fluke or something.” In his mind’s eye he had an image
of one of the death-walkers finding a loaded and cocked crossbow and operating
the weapon through an accident of habit. “If we were still under fire we would
have-”

He got no further.

A crossbow bolt cut off his words.

*

The sorcerer had no idea how much time had passed when he came back
to consciousness. He stared blearily around his surroundings and tried to make
sense of where he was. He was inside a tent. There were bright candle lights
around him. He caught a medicinal tang of tea-tree and lavender.

*How the hell had he ended up in a recovery tent?*

A cool night breeze wafted through the open tent flap where McCance
stood staring out into the night.

*“Easy does it,” Turner said as the sorcerer tried to stand. “You’re still
recovering.”*

“What happened?”

“You’d just finished telling us that no one was deliberately firing at us. We’re
currently treating you for a bolt wound and an overdose of dramatic irony.”

McCance stepped away from the window and said, “This is the bastard who
shot you.” He nodded towards a bound man kneeling at the foot of the sorcerer’s
bed.

The man wore the dark green military uniform of an officer from the Frozen
Forest guard. His face was a bruised and battered mess, as though he had badly
lost a fight. His lantern-jaw was scratched and bloody. His jacket was ripped across the broad chest to reveal a deep and unsightly scar. Beneath the bruises, the sorcerer thought, there was something about the man’s face that seemed familiar.

“Who is he?”

“He won’t say.”

“What was he doing?”

Turner shrugged again. “He claims he was trying to shoot death-walkers so we had a clear run to the Aesir road.”

The sorcerer raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“I didn’t believe him either,” McCance admitted. “Which is why I’ve got the apothecary working on a truth serum.”

Movement outside the recovery tent made McCance turn.

The sorcerer looked at Turner. “Where are we? Where’s the rest of the team? Did everyone else make it off the waggon safely?”

“Sergeant Sharpe’s dead,” Turner admitted. “But the rest of the team are uninjured. After you were shot I left the vehicle to find our assassin. McCance drove the waggon here, to an abandoned Jotnar camp. We’ve got limited resources but we’ve managed to make it relatively secure. Lieutenant McCance has some of the wise women trying to organise food and drink.”

McCance stepped back to the side of the sorcerer’s bed. He was accompanied by the psychic. “Freya Tyr,” he explained. “She wanted to talk with you as soon as you recovered.”

The Sorcerer nodded at the psychic and began the awkward process of trying to climb out of the bed whilst battling against Turner’s protests.
“This wasn’t the welcome the Guardians of the Desert had planned for you, sorcerer.”

“We were attacked by a member of the Frozen Forest guard. Do you know who he is?”

“We don’t know him,” Freya Tyr admitted. “McCance says your apothecary is working on a truth serum.”

“We’re going to stay in this location until we’ve better addressed the situation.”

“Are you sure?” Although her words were coming through the lips of a psychic, Freya Tyr still sounded surprised. “We were expecting you here at Aesir. We were going to make room for you in our main caravan.”

“No,” the sorcerer said firmly. “I need to execute a solution to this plague. Whilst it would be pleasant to make your acquaintance the only thing I’ve currently got to give you is a ceremonial pen.”

She laughed drily. “Another pen?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry,” Freya Tyr sounded as though she smiling wearily. “I was being ungracious. When High Minister Arnold visited here two seasons ago—”

“High Minister Arnold visited here?”

“—he kindly gave us a pen. He even insisted we use that pen for signing the official trade agreement he had negotiated.”

The sorcerer’s stomach tightened with apprehension. How could he have been so blind? “What trade agreement?”

“High Minister Arnold gave gifts of ex-military wagons in exchange for exclusive rights to some batches of the diamonds our alchemists produce.”
“Exclusive rights?”

The sorcerer could hear himself echoing Freya Tyr’s words and realised he likely sounded foolish. He could see McCance and Turner studying him sceptically. Embarrassed that he didn’t have answers, the sorcerer shook his head.

“We were still in the negotiation stage,” Freya Tyr elaborated. “Our elders wouldn’t allow High Minister Arnold to take any diamonds until they had assurances that there’d be no detrimental impact on the Guardians of the Desert.”

“I see,” the sorcerer growled. He didn’t bother to point out that the trade agreement would not cause a detrimental impact on the Guardians of the Desert if the majority of their population had been wiped out and all that remained were a handful of alchemists struggling to make a living from their talents.

“You signed the trade agreement here in Jotnar, didn’t you?”

Through the psychic’s lips Freya Tyr released a short surprised laugh. “How did you know the agreement was signed in Jotnar?”

The sorcerer shook his head. It was obvious this was where the agreement had been signed. This was where the infection was at its most prevalent. This was where the plague of death-walkers had clearly begun. Arnold had clearly given the Guardians of the Desert a cursed or contaminated pen. All he had to do now was wait until the plague had wiped out the majority of nomads and step in to take control of his interest in the alchemist’s diamond production processes.

“I need a cache of fifty colourless diamonds to be sent to High Minister Arnold with the utmost urgency. A single horse-rider could likely get them there in two days. I’d like it to be sooner if possible.”

“You should be resting,” Turner insisted.
The sorcerer waved the idea aside. He glanced down at the bloodied bandage over his shoulder and winced when he realised how close the bolt had come to his heart. “Before I was shot we were discussing how this plague of death-walkers began,” he remembered. “I need you to consult with Freya Tyr and tell me where it came from.”

“Come on,” Turner groaned. “Surely there’s more pressing matters for me to be looking into other than talking with the psychic?”

“The only other thing I need is that man’s uniform,” the sorcerer said, gesturing toward the Frozen Forest guard. “Strip him naked and put his uniform on one of the death-walkers.”

*

It was three days later when the sorcerer sat down with the psychic and asked to speak with High Minister Arnold. The usual ceremonial invocations were employed. Candles were lit. Incense was burnt. Eventually the psychic’s eyes rolled backward and the sorcerer knew he was talking to Arnold.

“Did you receive the sample of diamonds, High Minister?”

“An impressive cache, sorcerer.”

The psychic’s voice had taken on the nasal superiority of Arnold’s hateful voice. The sorcerer forced himself not to shiver.

“How’s it going with the scorpion people?” Arnold asked.

_Scorpion people._

The sorcerer’s hand stiffened in the act of shaping a fist. He forced himself not to sneer. “We got a lucky break,” he admitted.
“Really?”

“Turner and the wise women worked out a solution. They developed a treatment that can stop the illness.”

“Good for Turner.” Despite the cheeriness of the words, High Minister Arnold did not sound pleased. The psychic’s features were stiff with thinly concealed anger. “How did Turner manage that?”

“Tea-tree, lavender and a couple of mystic unguents,” the sorcerer admitted. If it wasn’t for Turner’s horrific acts of insurrection I’d say he deserved a commendation from the King.”

“Insurrection? What the hell has he done?”

“Sorry,” the sorcerer smiled. “You were asking how we’re combatting the plague. We’ve discovered where the illness began.”

The psychic’s eyes narrowed. High Minister Arnold was a shrewd man and it was obvious he understood there was a subtext to the conversation. “Where does Turner think the illness began?”

“He thinks it was a deliberate act of infection from the Northern Kingdom.”

“That’s one hell of an accusation. That’s the sort of talk that’s going to make the scorpion people really dislike everyone back here.”

Scorpion people.

This time the sorcerer couldn’t disguise his sneer of contempt.


High Minister Arnold was silent for a moment. “How very curious.”

“Turner’s a mystic,” the sorcerer added, “and he claims there are some disquieting auras surrounding the pen you left here.”
“What are you trying to say?”

The sorcerer took a deep breath. “The only explanation for how this plague began is that it was personally delivered here by you.”

“That’s a bold accusation.” High Minister Arnold sounded as though he had detached himself from the passion of the moment. “Are you able to support that accusation with any evidence?”

“We have a confession from your son,” the sorcerer admitted. “Although I’m not sure that would be wholly admissible in any court that didn’t approve of torture.”

“My son?”

“The son you had waiting for us outside the Jotnar turnpike. The son who killed Sergeant Sharpe and tried to take me out. Your son from the Frozen Forest guard. This son—”

He turned the psychic so she was facing an encampment of death-walkers, each scrambling against the mesh fence that kept them securely contained. One of the death-walkers wore the uniform of a captain in the Frozen Forest guard. His face was blackened with the illness. He clawed weakly at the security chains.

The psychic muttered a soft groan of despair.

“Do I really need to remind you about the identity of your son, High Minister Arnold?” the sorcerer demanded. “Especially when we have to discuss Turner’s acts of insurrection.”

It took only a moment for High Minister Arnold to regain his composure. “You mentioned these acts of insurrection before,” he said. “What are you babbling about?”

“Turner claims you’ll be admitting your guilt within the next two days.”
“And why does he think I’ll be doing that?”

“I thought I’d said,” the sorcerer frowned. “Turner has committed some atrocious acts of insurrection.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

For the first time, the sorcerer could hear the snap of anger in High Minister Arnold’s voice. It took an effort of willpower not to let the psychic see his grin.

“Turner has been working on auras,” the sorcerer explained. “He adjusted the component elements on the auras surrounding the pen you brought here. He changed the structure of those auras so they’re now a danger to those of us who were born and raised in the heart of the Northern Kingdom.” The sorcerer shivered dramatically and said, “The effects are pretty frightening.”

“That’s insanity,” High Minister Arnold whispered.

“Insane but effective,” the sorcerer said. He turned the psychic again so she was once more staring at the man in the Frozen Forest uniform. “I think this guard was born and bred in the Northern Kingdom. But he’s succumbed to the illness as though he’s a native of the desert.”

“What the hell have you done to my son?” High Minister Arnold demanded.

“I’ve just told you. Turner modified the auras you sent up here.”

“That’s insane. What would happen if those auras were sent back here?”

The sorcerer chuckled. “That’s the insurrection I’ve been describing. The diamonds he sent you are tainted with this modified aura. I’m assuming you’ve handled them.”

High Minister Arnold went silent. “Is this some sort of joke?”

“No joke, High Minister Arnold.”

“What are you expecting me to do?”
“Turner and I discussed that,” the sorcerer admitted. “I think you’ll break down, admit your crimes and come here begging for treatment.” He held up a small apothecary’s vial and added, “We’ve already got an antidote made up. Turner thinks you’ll carry on pretending you had nothing to do with the outbreak here until the condition melts your brain and starts to kill those you love and cherish in the Northern Kingdom. Have you been in touch with any family or friends since you took charge of the consignment of diamonds?”

“You unconscionable bastard.”

“You know where we are if you want to discuss antidotes.”

The sorcerer got McCance to take the psychic from his tent. As the mystic and the psychic left, Freya Tyr joined the sorcerer.

“What do you really think High Minister Arnold will do?” she asked.

“I think we’ll see High Minister Arnold driving through the Jotnar at some point in the next two or three days.”

“It’s a large risk, isn’t it?”

The sorcerer shook his head. “We’ve not really sent a contaminated aura back to the Northern Kingdom,” he admitted. “But High Minister Arnold won’t know that. He’s seen a man he thinks is his son acting as though he’s stricken, so he believes there’s a modified plague. Arnold’s got a threat from us, and he probably thinks we’re as unscrupulous as he is.”

“What will you do if he does come here?” Freya Tyr said. “Are you going to offer him your fake antidote in exchange for his confession?”

The sorcerer shrugged. “Perhaps.” He nodded toward the camp of contained survivors and said, “I think, when High Minister Arnold gets here, he can
discuss his need for treatment with some representatives from the scorpion people.”

THE END

NB. Discussion of this story is being postponed until after the next few pages which include the opening pages of ‘Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People’, fiction presented here to illustrate the relationship between Fantasy and Science Fiction.
Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People (opening pages)

Commander Hardman placed the pen in a hermetically sealed sleek black box and handed it to White. The box was decorated with the official FoSP gold seal from the Federation of Sapient Planets.

“Commander?” White was confused. “What’s this for?”

Hardman waved him silent and used his mobile phone to take a picture of White holding the boxed pen. The commander seemed inordinately fond of photographs. The walls of his office were decorated with a series of his collected images that each showed Hardman’s association with fame and power. On the wall behind his desk there was a framed picture of Hardman shaking hands with the Pope. Beside that was a picture of Hardman embracing the King of Procyon. Both images were dwarfed in size by a larger picture of Hardman shaking hands with a captain that White didn’t recognise. Given the fact that Hardman and the anonymous captain shared the same broad-chested build and identical lantern-jaws, it seemed safe to guess that this was Hardman and a favoured son.

“Take the pen with you,” Hardman said. “Give it to Freya Tyr. It’s our official gift to the scorpion people.”

Scorpion people.

White winced at Hardman’s lack of cultural sensitivity.

Gliese 667 Cc was a colonised mesoplanet in the triple star system of the Scorpius constellation. Two centuries earlier, whilst protesting against exploitative mining practices sanctioned by Earth’s government, the Gliese 667 colonists had declared independence.

They claimed they had been exploited for long enough.
They withdrew from the Federation of Sapient Planets and renamed their planet Asgard. Major continents and countries were renamed to honour various aspects of Norse mythology. White was familiar with a city named Valhalla, a transportation hub named Jotunheim and a mining community in Hlíðskjálf.

And yet, for all the seriousness of the situation in the eyes of the colonists, the name change was treated as a joke on Earth. Astronomers and cartographers refused to call the planet Asgard. The more vocal said that Gliese 667 was in the Scorpius constellation and the crueller commentators began to refer to the colonists as ‘scorpion people’.

The name became a common insult. More people on Earth knew the Gliese 667 colonists as ‘scorpion people’ rather than Asgardians. And it seemed, each time the colonists encountered that particular pejorative, the entire planet of Gliese 667 celebrated their rejection of FoSP and renewed their resolve to remain independent.

White checked the inscription on the pen to assure himself that the words ‘scorpion people’ weren’t tactlessly engraved on the casing. His mission wasn’t particularly sensitive but he didn’t want to run the risk of instigating a diplomatic event. Not whilst he was stuck on the planet.

He fixed Hardman with a stiff glare. “Please don’t use the phrase ‘scorpion people’ on any unsecured communication.”

Commander Hardman’s eyes sparkled with ill-natured mirth. “Don’t tell me you’re a scorpion-lover.”

White stiffened.

He rubbed at the tension headache throbbing at the nape of his neck.
“You’ve asked me to lead my team to a planet that seceded from the Federation of Sapient Planets two generations ago,” he said tiredly. “The remnants of the Asgardian government are working with us. It’s hoped we can share some of our developments in medical technologies in exchange for some of the diamonds that have always made their planet so exploitable.”

The humour disappeared from Hardman’s eyes. His nostrils curled with the familiar sneer of disgust that White had seen on the face of every military commander who’d ever called him a scorpion-loving liberal.

Hardman opened his mouth but White didn’t allow him to interrupt.

“According to our biologists,” White went on, “the plague that’s forced Gliese 667 to open up negotiations could be a Z-class microbe.”

“Those rumours about a Z-class microbe are unconfirmed.”

White shrugged. “When you factor in the detail that the planet is nearly twenty-four light years away from here, which means I’ve got a full day’s worth of traveling ahead of me, I’m sure you can understand why I might appear a little fractious.”

If Commander Hardman felt any sympathy it didn’t appear on his features.

“Are your team ready?”

“There are nine of us. I’ve got two field biologists, two engineers, two ex-military medics and a pair of security officers. We start our way through the first leg of the transportation arches this afternoon.”

Hardman extended a hand.

“Travel safely,” he said. “See if you can save the Scor-” He stopped himself mid-word and flashed an apologetic grin at White’s surfacing scowl. “See if you
can save the colonists,” he amended. “And don’t forget to bring back lots and lots of diamonds.”

White shook the man’s hand and then departed. He left the office quickly because he knew, if he stayed too long in Hardman’s company, the urge to punch the commander would prove irresistible.

* 

The remainder of ‘Zombie Attack on the Plant of the Scorpion People’ can be found in Appendix A. This first segment is presented to illustrate the relationship between these genres, as will be discussed in the following section of this chapter, Notes on Fantasy and Science Fiction.
Notes on Fantasy and Science Fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adventure</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Sorcerer</td>
<td>Character A’s goals are set.</td>
<td>Character A overcomes all obstacles.</td>
<td>Character A achieves a satisfactory resolution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People</td>
<td>The Sorcerer is ordered to deliver a ceremonial gift to a faraway community: the Scorpion People.</td>
<td>The Sorcerer establishes that the delivery of the ceremonial gift is a ruse to make sure that Scorpion People are suffering because of High Minister Arnold’s machinations.</td>
<td>The Sorcerer lays a trap to punish High Minister Arnold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People</td>
<td>Captain White is ordered to deliver a ceremonial gift to a faraway community: the Scorpion People.</td>
<td>Captain White establishes that the delivery of the ceremonial gift is a ruse to make sure that Scorpion People are suffering because of Commander Hardman’s machinations.</td>
<td>Captain White lays a trap to punish Commander Hardman.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As was mentioned before, the action stage of the adventure story is simply that Character A’s goals are set. There are two further examples of the adventure story presented here: ‘Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People’, and ‘The Sorcerer’.

In these stories, Captain White (in the science-fiction story) and the sorcerer (in the fantasy story), are respectively ordered to deliver a ceremonial gift to a faraway community. Some expository details are included, such as the

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50 It will be noted that whilst ‘Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People’ and ‘The Sorcerer’ are representative of different basic level genres, science fiction and fantasy respectively, the narratives tell the same story with only their semantic content changed to reflect the conventions of different genres.
revelation that Hardman’s/Arnold’s son is a military captain, background information on the disenfranchised status of the ‘scorpion people’, and an explanation that the remote territory is rich in desirable natural resources. However, the character goals in both these stories are presented in a clear and unambiguous fashion early on in the action stage: the hero is expected to undertake a diplomatic mission to visit a marginalised people.

Obstacles are presented in the form of arduous travel and hostile locals, and these obstacles are overcome in the reaction stage. An adventure story without obstacles in the reaction stage, or with obstacles that are neither addressed nor surmounted through the story, is not really an adventure story.

The consequences stage of the adventure story demands a successful resolution. The final lines of ‘Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People’ and ‘The Sorcerer’ provide a successful resolution to the story with regards to the villain’s abuse of the marginalised ‘scorpion people’:

‘What will you do if he does come here?’ Freya Tyr said. ‘Are you going to offer him a fake antidote in exchange for his confession?’ The sorcerer/White shrugged. ‘Perhaps.’ He nodded toward the camp of recovering microbe survivors and said, ‘I think, when High Minister Arnold/Hardman gets here, he can discuss his need for a cure with some representatives from the scorpion people.’

The science-fiction and fantasy genres are basic level genres that are subordinate to the adventure supergenre. Prototypical plots for adventure stories in the fantasy and science-fiction genres follow the same pattern that has been established for
every other story in the adventure genre as it is described here.\textsuperscript{51} This is not to say that all science-fiction and fantasy stories are adventure stories. The semantic aspect of the science-fiction or fantasy story can be applied to any genre. As previously mentioned, \textit{Do Android's Dream of Electric Sheep?} is syntactically a whodunit mystery, but it is set in a semantic world of advanced technology and artificial intelligence that makes it representative of science-fiction (Dick, 1968). Likewise, the Disney interpretation of \textit{Beauty and the Beast} retains the semantic fantasy components of shape-shifting and mystical curses but, syntactically, the story is a romance (1991). Finally, the story ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’ in this collection was shown to contain the syntactic structure of the mystery genre but, semantically, the advanced technology the characters are using has allowed me to pitch the piece as science fiction.

Although the science-fiction genres and fantasy genres have obvious characteristics and features that make them distinct and disparate, there is no unambiguous definition that fully works to delineate either genre. Historian W. Warren Wagar describes science-fiction as, ‘\textit{any work of fiction, including drama or narrative poetry, that specialises in plausible speculation about life under changed but rationally conceivable circumstances, in an alternative past or present, or in the future’} (Wagar, 1982: 9). The relationship between science-fiction and the ‘rationally conceivable’ is commonly associated with Hugo Gernsback who, whilst trying to define ‘scientifiction’ for the readers of his magazine, \textit{Amazing Stories}, described the genre as ‘a charming romance

\textsuperscript{51} Action: Character A’s goal is set. Reaction: Character A overcomes various obstacles. Consequences: satisfactory resolution.
intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision’ (1926: 3). Gernsbeck cites Poe, Verne and Wells as being earlier exponents of the genre, although it should be noted that Verne saw his own work as being unlike that produced by Wells because of their markedly different approaches to the scientific content. Verne said:

‘I do not see the possibility of comparison between his work and mine. We do not proceed in the same manner. It occurs to me that his stories do not repose on very scientific bases. No, there is no rapport between his work and mine. I make use of physics. He invents. I go to the moon in a cannon-ball, discharged from a cannon. Here there is no invention. He goes to Mars in an airship, which he constructs of a metal which does away with the law of gravitation. Ça c’est très joli,’ 52 cried Monsieur Verne in an animated way, ‘but show me this metal. Let him produce it.’ (Westfahl, 2005: 324)

The distinctions that identify science fiction are not only limited to the ab/use of scientific rhetoric. Isaac Asimov argues that, ‘in science fiction, more than in any other branch of literature, background’s the thing’ (1963: 9). It is an opinion that runs counter to writer Theodore Sturgeon’s definition: ‘A science-fiction story is a story built around human beings, with a human problem and a human solution’ (Blish, 1964: 14). Lecturer Eric S. Rabkin moves closer to providing a useful definition when he claims that science fiction is defined by three related characteristics:

1. The fantastic is made plausible through attention to the rhetoric of science, whether or not legitimate science is used.
2. Science-fiction includes high adventure.
3. Defined by intellectual excitement, science-fiction asks the reader to think. (Rabkin, 1998: 4)

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52 This is very pretty.
Rabkin’s acknowledgement of the rhetoric of the science being discussed allows for material to remain within the genre, even when scientific advancements have stopped the narrative from being rationally conceivable, such as the development of an advanced understanding of electricity that has superseded Mary Shelley’s use of this science in her novel. Interestingly, Rabkin’s second point places a stress on high adventure as he concedes that the element of action is vital to the content of science fiction. However, although the focus here is fixed on science, it will be conceded that Rabkin’s definition allows for some overlap with other genres, particularly fantasy. Others also recognise this lack of discreteness, like lecturer Michael D. C. Drout:

Mapping out the boundaries of the fantasy genre is very difficult. It is obviously related to science-fiction, historical fiction, horror or ghost stories, and romance. Any one work can be both fantasy and another one of these genres, but it is difficult to find any rules that cover them all. (Drout, 2006: 7)

However, this contrasts with the view opined by Darin Park, editor of the Complete Guide to Writing Fantasy, who suggests that ‘Loosely, fantasy is an applied mythology, a creation in the mind of an author of worlds or events that could not possibly exist in the scientific realm’ (2002: 8).

Whilst these definitions offer some loose guidance for readers and writers, it is useful here to remember that, according to writer Bienvenido Santos, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. struggled to have editors consider his writing as ‘fiction’ rather than ‘science fiction’ because, ‘a typical word-rate for publication of ‘fiction’ in a first-line magazine was about five cents; for science fiction two. Every time Vonnegut won that struggle, he increased his paycheck by one hundred-fifty percent’ (Rabkin,
2009: 15). This point is mentioned to show that Vonnegut, an author closely associated with science fiction, was happy to renounce the label if it allowed him to meet the pragmatic goal of substantially increasing payment for his writing.

Ultimately, the distinction is immaterial in the context of this thesis because the science-fiction plot and the fantasy plot represent basic level genres: subordinate in these examples to the supergenre of the adventure plot and defined solely by their semantic content. To this end the structures of the science-fiction plot and the fantasy plot (as they are presented here) remain subordinate to the adventure plot.

As will have been noticed, these final two stories are the same narrative but semantically adapted to suit the dictates of different genres. This same story could have been restructured semantically so that it fitted the conventions of other basic level genres such as the thriller, the war story and the western. However, syntactically, because ‘Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People’ and ‘The Sorcerer’ both contain an action stage where Character A’s goals are set, a reaction stage where Character A overcomes all obstacles, and a consequences stage where Character A achieves a satisfactory resolution, the stories can be appropriately described as adventure stories.

Obviously, because they are conventionally defined by semantic features, this suggests that science-fiction stories and fantasy stories do not necessarily have to be based on the structure of the adventure plot. As previously mentioned, Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is syntactically a mystery but, semantically, it is science fiction. Diana Gabaldon’s time-travelling epics, the Outlander series, are semantically fantasy, but they follow the structure of the romance plot. The
short fiction in an anthology such as Mitzi Szereto’s *Red Velvet and Absinthe* (2011), a collection of erotic fiction where each story contains some aspect of gothic fantasy, includes werewolves, fallen angels, shape-shifters and vampires. Semantically, these stories contain the furniture of fantasy stories. However, syntactically, they follow the structure associated with the erotic story. That is to say, all examples of basic level stories can belong to one of the five syntactic supergenres, adventure, erotica, horror, mystery or romance, whilst also being identified by any appropriate semantic label. This final point will be explored more fully over the following pages.
Chapter 10: Applications of the Template

There is nothing more disenchanting to man than to be shown the springs and mechanism of any art. All our arts and occupations lie wholly on the surface; it is on the surface that we perceive their beauty, fitness, and significance; and to pry below is to be appalled by their emptiness and shocked by the coarseness of the strings and pulleys. (Stevenson, 1905: 5)

This thesis is presented to discuss some of Stevenson’s springs and mechanisms, or strings and pulleys, as they relate to the connection between plot and genre within the short story.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adventure</strong></td>
<td>Character A’s goals are set.</td>
<td>Character A achieves a satisfactory resolution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Erotica</strong></td>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B.</td>
<td>Character A becomes intimate with Entity B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Horror</strong></td>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B.</td>
<td>Character A demonstrates a consistently logical response to the conflict presented in the action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mystery</strong></td>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Concept B.</td>
<td>Character A uncovers the puzzle presented by Concept B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romance</strong></td>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B.</td>
<td>Character A and Entity B encounter various obstacles that threaten to impede their relationship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table above reiterates the action, reaction and consequences stages of typical short fiction across the five identified supergenres. The short fiction presented in this thesis, and the subsequent breakdown in each genre’s associated analysis, illustrates these stages. This similarity of narrative structure is not an unexpected development. As literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall observes:

No matter how far we travel back into literary history, and no matter how deep we plunge into the badlands of world folklore, we always find the same astonishing thing: *their stories are just like ours*. There is a universal grammar in world fiction, a deep pattern of heroes confronting trouble and struggling to overcome. (Gottschall, 2013: 57-58)

The shape of the stories presented here, each one following a structure that has distinct similarities with other stories from the same genre, conforms to Gottschall’s broad notion that there is a universal grammar in world fiction. It is these similarities, this suggestion of a universality of form connecting these stories, that is being articulated in this thesis.

As was stated earlier (both in the Introduction and in Chapter 2: Methodology), the majority of these stories were written without explicit academic investigation into genre conventions beyond a general understanding of typical tropes. Admittedly, as a creative writing lecturer and voracious reader with eclectic tastes, it is conceded that I am already conversant with the structures of many literary genres, with varying levels of familiarity. Therefore, this thesis can be viewed as a way for me to formalise my own understanding of the relationship between plot and genre and, also, as a way for me to test the applicability of the proposed templates.
In this collection, the exception to that approach is ‘Victoria’s Hand’. This piece of erotic fiction was written in 2006 specifically to meet an editor’s stated requirements for a 2007 anthology, *She’s on Top*. It should also be noted that this story was written prior to my studying fiction at an academic level. Because I have an extensive publishing history in the genre of erotic fiction, it was thought that using an earlier piece here would obviate the issue of producing a newly constructed piece of fiction in this genre, one that would almost certainly have been influenced by my pre-existing knowledge of erotica, and would more likely have been influenced by a desire to produce something that conformed to the genre’s perceived patterns. ‘Victoria’s Hand’ was selected from my personal backlist of short fiction and is included here to demonstrate that my ideas on commonalities of plots within genres apply to the fiction I created prior to beginning my current research. All of this is mentioned to preface an explanation of the contribution to knowledge that is presented with this thesis.

Whilst discussing this area of study with colleagues, one of the commonest questions I’ve encountered has been: ‘What’s the point?’ Obviously this question has been couched in a range of modes from the polite (‘What practical applications might this research uncover?’) through to the academically inquisitive (‘How does this contribute to knowledge?’) and on to the aggressively despairing (‘Why are you bothering?’).

As Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper observe, ‘a creative writing researcher […] might equally be undertaking their investigations with their individual project as the
initiator and definer of their progression and success. Such individualism will involve synthesising aspects of knowledge’ (2013: 4). To that end, the created fiction presented here, alongside the reflective considerations given to the production process, and supported by the broad range of readings that have been undertaken to consider the component aspects of literary exemplars, appears to have been synthesised and is now contributing to a more informed understanding of the process of producing fiction, as illustrated by texts that are submitted in Appendix A, B and C, all of which will be discussed in more depth shortly.

As mentioned before (Chapter 2: Methodology), as a lecturer in creative writing I am a strong advocate of the belief that the way to learn good writing comes from the practice of good reading. Hazel Smith supports this idea when she says, ‘The main special qualities writers must have are perseverance, motivation, the willingness to search for methods which suit them, energy to push themselves out of their own comfort zones and avid reading habits’ (Smith, 2005: ix). These are sentiments that echo Stephen King’s advice, quoted earlier: ‘If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot’ (King, 2000: 164); or, in the succinct words of Steven Pinker: ‘Good writers are avid readers’ (Pinker, 2014: 11).

However, whilst I remain an advocate of good reading practices, I also believe that good reading can be made a more relevant experience for the writer if it fosters the opportunity for informed discussion of the component aspects of the text. It is anticipated that the material presented here could suffice as a template to help
facilitate such discussions amongst writers. As poet and educator Katharine Coles observes:

Knowledge in creative writing is [...] not necessarily the knowledge found in other fields. It is the knowledge of two minds, that of the writer and that of the reader, actively engaging in exchange and in the kind of understanding that cannot be reduced to the abstract. All this can inform the teaching of creative writing, encourage and support individuality, and contribute to originality in the work that emerges from creative writing workshops and programmes. (Coles, 2013: 155)

To that end, I have been using this research in the classroom. I have been directing those students who expressed a need for structure to approach the construction of their fiction whilst keeping in mind appropriate genre frameworks. I have also been using the overall template to shape structure with a collaborative series of short compositions. In addition to these areas of application for this study, the following illustrative examples demonstrate how this research has begun to shape other aspects of my writing, indicating how this is likely to continue to shape the fiction I produce, and will undoubtedly inform the way I teach creative writing. The attached appendices include examples of this material, each one of which is discussed below in greater detail.
In August 2015 I attended Eroticon, the UK’s conference for sex bloggers and erotica writers. I was attending Eroticon to conduct a workshop offering practical ways to address ways of bridging the crossover between the genres of romantic fiction and erotica. After my workshop I was approached by two editors who asked if I would be interested in producing a piece of romantic erotic fiction for an anthology of novellas they were compiling. The anthology was intended to follow on from the success of their previously published title, *Brit Boys: on Boys* (2014).

My immediate response was to agree to produce the requested fiction. It was only after Eroticon that I discovered I had committed myself to producing a short novella with predominantly homoerotic content. Having never written exclusively gay erotica previously I considered tactfully withdrawing my agreement. However, reflecting on the challenge presented by this opportunity, I reasoned that the creation of a suitable text could be achieved if I applied my short romantic fiction template to an appropriate story idea.  

It should be noted here that I elected not to use the erotic fiction template. Because the editors had specifically asked for romantic erotic fiction, I reasoned it would be easier to make a romantic fiction erotic, rather than trying to make an erotic fiction romantic. My reasoning was that it would be easier for me to use the syntactic construct of a romance story and colour it, semantically, with the tropes associated with erotic fiction.

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53 *Action:* Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B. Character A and Entity B encounter various obstacles that threaten to impede their relationship. Character A and Entity B achieve a satisfactory resolution.
The inception of the story idea occurred in the following way. I had recently hosted an open mic poetry event and, at the time, thought the title ‘Open Mike’ would be evocative of a character name and a poetic setting. There was also the idea that the title could be perceived as being sexually suggestive in terms of homoerotic content. Reflecting on the title, I decided that the character ‘Mike’ would have to be Entity B, and I spent some time working on the goals and ambitions of Character A: Ken. As Ken/Character A needed to be brought into conflict with Mike/Entity B, I needed to produce a story where Ken required the close assistance of Mike, a performance poet. This meant finding a credible motive for Ken needing his services.

Whilst I had thought it might be difficult to write convincingly about intimate homoerotic encounters, I quickly discovered that the true problem in compiling this story came from constructing a convincing reason as to why any character would ever need the assistance of a performance poet. If Mike had been a plumber or an electrician, then Ken would have a valid and easily established reason for needing his services. Further, the necessity for the pair to spend time in close proximity could have been easily developed to an audience’s satisfaction if Mike had been employed in a practical occupation. However, because I wanted to make the title of the story relevant to my vague story idea, and because I was already invested in the notion of a character called ‘Open Mike’, I had to devise a reason for Ken needing the assistance of a poet.
The eventual idea was reverse-engineered in that I compiled a very short list of reasons as to why someone would need to read a poem in public. From there I decided that the story would probably be most effective if the conclusion was set at a wedding. A conclusion at a funeral would likely have been too solemn, countering the upbeat, sex-positive content the editors had requested. The need to read a poem, to obtain a sampling of feedback, seemed an equally unprofitable area of consideration as this would have required a lot more backstory to explain Ken’s academic qualifications and any relevant area of study. Consequently, it seemed appropriate that Ken could want Mike’s guidance on how to deliver a poem professionally at a wedding. This gave the narrative a logical structure that supported the necessary proximity of the couple so they could exploit each opportunity to express their sexual desires, fulfilling the criteria of the plot’s semantic content so that it met the editor’s needs.

Although this was my first experimentation with homoerotic fiction, it was not my first piece of erotic fiction. And, as Morgan Hawke explains: ‘Writing sex is easy because it’s formulaic. It’s the same exact formula as an ordinary action sequence – and chronological order is still the only way to do it’ (2007: 245). Consequently, once the story was established, it was then a matter of managing the descriptive content of the sex scenes so that each episodic encounter escalated in levels of intimacy and a perceived increase in satisfaction. The idea behind this approach was to make each subsequent sexual encounter seem bolder and more satisfying than the previous one. Tobias, discussing his interpretation of conflict within the

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54 To read a poem at a wedding. To read a poem at a funeral. To read a poem to an audience who would be expected to provide feedback or give critical commentary.
love story, says: ‘Each conflict gains intensity. Readers feel themselves being thrust toward the cataclysm, the climax, when all hell will break loose and the story will get resolved’ (1993: 21). As a consequence of this increase of intensity in the conflict of an erotic story, the final sex scenes are seen as the most powerful and are therefore the most memorable for the reader. Or, as Bell explains when discussing endings: ‘You want it to be memorable, to stay with readers after the book is closed’ (2004: 108).

‘Open Mike’ was published in *Brit Boys: With Toys* (2015). The editors seemed satisfied with this as an example of erotic romance, and working to the template of a romantic fiction as has been described in this thesis, the story was relatively easy to construct and then write. A copy of ‘Open Mike’ is attached in Appendix B.
Before continuing, it would be prudent to mention a caveat about the bloody-mindedness of writers, particularly with regards to guidelines and suggested principles. To clarify, in a recent FaceBook exchange, the American novelist Laura Antoniou opined, 'Stephen King says, “Never use adverbs.” I use them with malice aforethought' (Antoniou, 2017). In a similar vein, the British romance novelist, Marissa Farrar, confided that she had always been advised never to write in alternating first person Point of View (PoV) because, according to an editor she worked with, ‘Readers hate that.’ Farrar continues to write books in alternating first person PoV and sales seem to suggest that, even if her readers do ‘hate that’, they are continuing to purchase her work (Farrar, 2017). Likewise, the erotica author Sommer Marsden explained that she had been told, ‘Don't write male/male erotica. Leave that to the gay writers’. This advice came from one of her first editors. Marsden adds, ‘My first traditionally published collection was male/male erotica and some of my most popular books are my m/m works’ (Marsden, 2017). All of which is mentioned to reinforce the idea that, if a writer is presented with a ‘rule’, it is relatively common practice for the writer to try and produce something that bends, contravenes or simply breaks that rule. The point is made by Janine Ashbless, the erotic fiction writer, when she said:

I was told I couldn't "possibly" be allowed to write a minotaur sex scene for Black Lace. So, I wrote a whole story about minotaur rape in my next collection, very carefully worded, in such a way as you couldn't tell it [contained] obscene cow sex unless you recognized the Theseus legend. (Ashbless: 2017)

There are examples of constrained writing, such as Walter Abish’s *Alphabetical Africa* (1974), where the first chapter contains only words starting with the letter *a,*
and the second chapter contains only words starting with a or b, and so on; or Ernest Vincent Wright’s lipogram novel, *Gadsby* (1939), a 50,000-word novel that does not include any word that contains the letter e; or the various methods employed by the OuLiPo movement which include the N+7 Technique for writing poetry, where an existing poem is changed by having every noun substituted for one that occurs seven entries further along in the dictionary, and the Prisoner’s Constraint, where letters which rise above or fall below the line on the page (such as b, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, p, q, t, and y) are omitted from the writing. Considering these examples, each of which shows a writer producing work almost as an act of defiance or wilful non-compliance, it is easy to see why writer and critic Sally O’Reilly, discussing the necessary qualities that are required in a writer, cites ‘hard work, commitment, bloody-mindedness and talent, probably in that order’ (2011: ix). It is that aspect of bloody-mindedness, that desire to do something simply because a rule, guideline or common wisdom has suggested it cannot or should not be done, that needs addressing here.55

This thesis has listed certain commonalities for the structure of short genre-specific fiction and it is appreciated that any writer, predisposed to the bloody-minded attitude described above, could read this and be prompted to produce a fiction that contravenes one or more of the elements that make up these structures. Obviously, each of these guidelines could be easily flouted:

55 Of course, it could be that the personal stories cited above are simply metanarratives, with authors explaining details of their writing *ex post facto* in such a way as to give a narrative structure to reported events. If this is the case, it will be noted that each of these metanarratives follows the structure of an adventure story where, in the action stage, the narrator is faced with an imposition of limitations that need to be overcome, and then with the reaction stage the narrator overcomes those limitations to move into the consequences stage which results in the triumph of successful publication. The conflict, as with all adventure stories, has been the battle between the desire for achievement against the risk of potential failure.
Character/Concept/Entity B could be kept secret from Character A, or a satisfactory resolution could be portrayed as unsatisfactory, or a narrative could be written where any of the aforementioned guidelines were contradicted. However, I would like to argue that, given our human predisposition to pareidolia, that is, our ability to identify patterns even in randomness, a cohesive fiction would still be constructed by the reader. This notion is perhaps best illustrated with an explanation of how I wrote the short story 'Here Comes Orgasm Girl'.

Whilst each of the identified templates attempts to describe a typical plot, representative of one of the five supergenres, I was curious to find out whether a story could be created that did not conform to the consequential patterns of genre conventions discussed in this thesis. Initially, I reasoned that it would have been easy to violate these conventions by either producing a romance where the characters did not achieve a satisfactory resolution, or writing a mystery story where the puzzle remained unsolved. However, whilst it might have been easy to write such stories, I believe it would have been difficult to find a contemporary publisher willing to consider them as successful fiction. As mentioned in the Introduction, these stories were not written with the express intention of publication. However, they were written to a standard deemed appropriate for publication and a simple subversion of the consequences stage would have produced a story that, on a personal level, I did not think attained the same standard as the other material contained within this thesis. Author Brad Haseman, discussing the practice-led principle of performative research, suggests that the material outcomes of practice are ‘all-important representations of research findings in their own right’ (2006: 205). Whilst I reasoned that it might be easy to
produce a text that defied some genre conventions, I did not want to write
something for the sake of producing text: I wanted to write something that, even if
it did defy the identified narrative structure, would still be considered suitable for
publication.

Additionally, it would likely have presented a greater challenge finding readers
willing to accept drastically unconventional and unsatisfying conclusions to
established genre fiction. As was explained previously (Chapter 4: Analysis of the
Romance Genre and its Associated Plot) reader expectations can often be fixed
on a particular outcome for a story. With these considerations for audience and
reception in mind, I wondered if it would be possible to write a fiction that was a
‘mash-up’ of stages, that is, a story that adhered to the action stage for one
supergenre template, the reaction stage for a second supergenre template and the
consequences stage of a third supergenre template.

For the ‘mash-up’, I chose the action stage of an adventure story, the reaction
stage of an erotic story, and the consequences of a mystery. Rather than being
random selections, these elements were chosen after careful deliberation. Erotica,
horror and romance each start with an action stage, where Character A is brought
into conflict with Entity B, and I wanted to avoid beginning in that fashion. My
reasoning for this decision was, if I began a piece in the style of a typical erotic,
horror or romance story, the direction of the fiction would be restricted by the
conventions of that genre. The reaction stage would either have to follow the

56 Character A’s goals are set.
57 Character A becomes intimate with Entity B.
58 Concept B is resolved.
genre’s conventions, or the reaction stage would potentially read like a *non sequitur*. Moreover, the consequences stages of the erotic, horror and romance stories contain so many similarities that there would either have been an overlap, because erotica and horror share the same consequence, or the story would have concluded with the marginal difference that comes from giving a horror story or an erotic story a happy/satisfactory ending, or giving a romance an unsatisfactory ending.

Beginning with the action stage of an adventure story, moving into the reaction stage of an erotic story, and then concluding with the consequences stage of a mystery story, still suggested that the content would have an illogical and unsound structure. However, I anticipated that this unlikely combination of elements would allow me to shape the idea I was formulating into something that I hoped would be of interest to the erotica editor F. Leonora Solomon, who was then actively seeking stories for an anthology.

As mentioned before, I wanted to give any story I created the best chance of being accepted for publication. Because most of my writing has been successful in the genre of erotic fiction, I reasoned that a story that acknowledged some of the conventions of that genre would be the most likely to achieve publication. Solomon’s call for submissions stated, ‘Tales of strong women with irresistible storylines are required’ (2015: n.p.). Consequently, I created a story that began with an action stage where the strong female character had goals set. In the reaction stage the story went on to develop an explicit sexual content, appropriate for the requirements of Solomon’s brief. The narrative concluded in the
consequences stage as though the whole piece had been a mystery that needed solving. It was written under the working title, ‘Here Comes Orgasm Girl’ and submitted to the publisher under the proposed title of ‘Orgasm-Girl’.59

The action stage of ‘Orgasm-Girl’ begins when the central character, Betty, is left in charge of her employer’s warehouse overnight. This information is given to the reader in Betty’s recollection of Big Eric’s instruction: ‘Betty, I want you to keep an eye on the security of the warehouse tonight’. As has been explained earlier, this is typical of an adventure story in that Betty’s goals are immediately set.

I was aware that an erotic reaction stage would be seen as a non sequitur if there were not some sexual aspect foregrounded during the action stage. This is why the story is set in a warehouse that deals in the supply and distribution of adult novelties and sex toys, and it is the presence of this semantic detail that gives the story the semblance of being a cohesive whole. Betty uses these items which, semantically, would not be out of place in a typical erotic fiction story, to assume a secret identity: Orgasm-Girl. By having her assume this persona, the story is able to segue from being an adventure to becoming a piece of short erotic fiction.

During the erotic reaction stage, Betty/Orgasm-Girl administers an erotic, sexualised punishment to the intruders who had been attempting to rob Big Eric’s warehouse. Again, this fulfils the criterion of the erotica reaction stage because Character A/Betty becomes intimate with Entity B/the intruders. As an aside to the content of sexualised punishment in this reaction stage, Betty/Orgasm-Girl puzzles

59 A copy of ‘Orgasm-Girl’ can be found in Appendix B.
over how to enforce justice to penalise the intruders for their criminal actions. This puzzle can be seen as the story’s Concept B: how will the intruder(s) be punished? The story concludes with Betty sending one of the thieves to receive further punishment at the hands of Big Eric’s other security staff. This development alludes to the typical consequences of a supergenre mystery story in that Betty has found a way to resolve the puzzle of Concept B by sending the main villain to be punished by an external agency.

Whilst the creation of this narrative does suggest that it is quite possible to compile a mash-up, a piece of short fiction that is not confined to following the action, reaction and consequences of a single supergenre, I would argue that this exercise shows how easily the syntactic patterns can be overlooked in the face of a few overt semantic marker[s]. To illustrate this argument, it is worth remembering that ‘Orgasm-Girl’ was written as a ‘mash-up’ in an attempt to usurp the conventional content of action, reaction and consequences. The action stage was written to show Betty’s goals being set. However, the story was also written to include the semantic aspect of erotica, or at least some of the tropes associated with erotica. This aspect of the narrative’s content was included to allow the story to flow from the action stage to the reaction stage as part of a contiguous narrative. Consequently, because the story begins by introducing Betty (Character A) to the intruders (Entity B) with whom she later becomes intimate, it is also possible to describe this stage in terms of the action stage of a typical erotic plot where Character A is introduced to Entity B. This aspect was not included as a syntactic component but it is an inescapable semantic element that needed to be included to give the story a sense of cohesion. In some ways, this is similar to the
nuances previously mentioned in Chapter 4: The Romance Genre, where it was noted that the romance story ‘Pen Friends’ could potentially have been discussed as a mystery, because of the semantic content of investigating officers, an interrogation room and stolen property. This overlap of the supergenre syntactic structures was also observed in Chapter 7: The Whodunit – a basic level genre, where it was suggested that the mystery story ‘i-Dunit [BETA]’ could also have been interpreted as a science-fiction story because the semantic content contains technology that is sufficiently advanced to be considered (by a contemporary readership) as futuristic. Whilst it is conceivable to think of these distinct readings as being the results of individual interpretations, it is also worth acknowledging that the semantic content of a story confronts the reader, on the surface, whereas the syntactic structure is less visible, more abstract.

In the consequences stage of ‘Orgasm-Girl’, because Betty (Character A) sends one of the intruders to receive a greater punishment whilst she continues to mete out sexual discipline to the other intruder, it could be argued that rather than merely resolving the puzzle that is Concept B, as would be expected for the consequences of a supergenre mystery, Betty is simply achieving the partial resolution that is found in the consequences of a typical erotic short story. Again, this promise of further intimacy can be seen as a semantic aspect that needed to be created to compensate for what was lacking syntactically. This overlap of component elements is shown in the table below.
All of this is mentioned here to show that these templates illustrate the underlying structure of these genres, even though they are clearly templates that can be disrupted and altered. Consequently, these templates can also be useful to the creative writer who is keen to write with more originality by subverting genre expectations. In the case of ‘Orgasm-Girl’, the experiment was to manipulate expectations and produce a story that outwardly conforms to genre conventions [(i.e. semantically) while the story’s syntactic structure is manipulated to produce something that confounds traditional expectations. That is to say, these templates are useful as a teaching aid precisely because they show that simple templates never ultimately work as discrete boxes. The templates demonstrate a key aspect of the creative process in that they function as basic building blocks that can be used unchanged, or adapted accordingly, dependent on the needs of the individual writer.

One of the things that occurred to me as I was writing ‘Orgasm-Girl’ was that the story had the potential to be developed into a series of episodic narratives. The idea of creating several 'Orgasm-Girl' stories, each with simple plots defined in the action stage, descriptive intimacy in the reaction stage and an appropriate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mash-Up: Orgasm-Girl</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Character A’s goals are set.</td>
<td>Character A becomes intimate with Entity B.</td>
<td>Concept B is resolved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erotica</td>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Entity B.</td>
<td>The conflict between Character A and Entity B reaches a partially resolved conclusion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
resolution in the consequences, seemed not only tenable but quite appealing. It is acknowledged that the content is not particularly edifying, empowering or enlightening but it appears sufficiently entertaining to meet the needs of a specific audience. Further, it is this potential for developing the story into a series of episodic narratives that provides the greatest clue as to why a story written to include a mash-up of discrete supergenre elements can also be perceived as conforming to the expectations of a single supergenre template. It is because the same dual pattern can be seen in other pieces of short fiction. In Agatha Christie’s ‘Sanctuary’, a short story from Miss Marple’s Final Cases (2008, 5-21), the action begins in the typical style of a mystery story with the discovery of a dying body in a church. Character A here is Bunch, Miss Marple’s goddaughter, whilst Concept B is the mystery of why a man dying from a gunshot wound made his way to a remote village church. In the reaction stage of the story, Bunch/Character A enlists the help of Miss Marple and together they discover that the dying man is an escaped convict trying to ensure valuable gemstones reach his estranged daughter. In the consequences stage of the story Miss Marple establishes the provenance of the gemstones and Bunch uncovers the identity of the dead man’s daughter.

It is easy enough to cite this tale as a typical example of the supergenre’s mystery story where, in the action stage, Character A is introduced to concept B; during the reaction Character A uncovers the puzzle that is Concept B, and the consequences stage comes when Concept B is resolved. However, given that

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60 ‘Orgasm-Girl’ was accepted for inclusion in Solomon’s anthology, with an anticipated publication date of 2018.
Miss Marple is a series character, a character who is repeatedly embroiled in the adventure of murder mysteries, it would also be possible to describe this story (and many other Miss Marple stories) as an overlap of the mystery story with the action and consequences stages of typical adventure stories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adventure</strong></td>
<td>Character A’s goals are set.</td>
<td>Character A overcomes all obstacles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mystery</strong></td>
<td>Character A is brought into conflict with Concept B.</td>
<td>Character A uncovers the puzzle presented by Concept B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mash-Up: Sanctuary</strong></td>
<td>Miss Marple’s/Character A’s goals are set: resolve Concept B</td>
<td>Miss Marple uncovers the puzzle presented by Concept B.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other examples of overlap or alternative interpretation can be seen in a broad range of fiction, including several of the Sherlock Holmes stories, a substantial bulk of comic books stories, including Spiderman, Ironman, the Avengers and Deadpool, and many, many others. All of this is mentioned to demonstrate that, whilst the original supergenre templates fairly describe short fiction in a consistent fashion, it is possible to use these templates to reinterpret stories in a range of innovative and unconventional ways that still describe a cohesive piece of commercial fiction.
Conclusion

Plot is no more than footprints left in the snow after your characters have run by on their way to incredible destinations. Plot is observed after the fact rather than before. It cannot precede action. It is the chart that remains when an action is through. That is all Plot ever should be. It is human desire let run, running, and reaching a goal. It cannot be mechanical. It can only be dynamic. (Bradbury, 1996:150, italics in original)

Ray Bradbury’s assertion is absolutely correct: plot should not be mechanical. Despite the formulaic structure of the material that has been presented here, the purpose of this thesis has not been to suggest that plot should be viewed as mechanical, or as an aspect of story that can precede action. If anything, the purpose of this thesis has been to illustrate Bradbury’s point by showing that the footprints of plot are made by characters who are space travellers or dragon-tamers, running in directions that are adventurous, eroticised, horrifying, mysterious or romantic. At the risk of overstretched the metaphor, the characteristic markings of each footprint would represent the semantic content of plot, whilst the direction of the footprints would be seen as the syntactic structure of plot. A story will follow the supergenre path of an adventure, of erotica, horror, mystery or of a romance. It is the shape of the footprints that will tell the reader whether they have been involved with the cloven hooves of a fantasy narrative, or the space-boots from a science-fiction story or the distinctive footprint from some other basic level or subordinate genre.

This thesis began with an examination of three supergenres: the horror, the romance and the erotic. As discussed in Chapter 5: Analysis of the Erotic Genre and its Associated Plot, as well as being mentioned in Chapter 6: Analysis of the Mystery Genre and its Associated Plot, the plots of these genres share a
commonality in that they each focus on relationships between characters. This was the distinction that Tobias made when he referred to ‘plots of the body, and plots of the mind’ (1993: 33). Thus, in all three of these supergenres, the action stage shows Character A being brought into conflict with Entity B.

In the horror genre it was shown that conflict is situated between security and fear, and Entity B is associated with some unpleasant outcome that runs counter to Character A’s aspirations. This was illustrated in ‘The Pen’ where Entity B was a possessed pen: a possessed pen predicting futures that Character A (John) did not want to experience. It was also shown that there was a parity in this syntactic structure with classic examples from the horror genre, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘A Cask of Amontillado’, M. R. James’s ‘A Warning to the Curious’ and H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Outsider’, as well as contemporary horror stories such as Robert Bloch’s ‘Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper’, Ramsey Campbell’s ‘The Companion’ and Stephen King’s ‘The Boogeyman’. Each of these horror stories also showed that the parity of the syntactic structure extended to the reaction stage, where Character A demonstrates a consistently logical response to the conflict presented in the action. Thus, in ‘The Pen’, we saw John trying to find a way of dealing with his possessed pen, just as Montresor in ‘A Cask of Amontillado’ follows an internally logical approach to address the slight he believes was committed by Fortunato. This is the same structure we see when Lester Billings in ‘The Boogeyman’ relates his story to the psychiatrist in a chronological and unwavering narrative. The same logically consistent approaches to address each story’s conflict are adopted through the reaction stage of all the aforementioned examples. Finally, in the consequences stage of the horror story, where the
conflict between Character A and Entity B reaches a partially resolved conclusion, we see this syntactic pattern being repeated in ‘The Pen’, where the narrative concludes with John reading the final threat written by the possessed pen. This follows the same syntactic pattern of partial resolution as had been shown in the consequences of ‘Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper’, where the villain of the title kills Sir Guy Hollis, clearly intending to continue his murderous ways; and the same syntactic pattern as seen in Ramsey Campbell’s ‘The Companion’, where Mr Stone finds himself holding hands with Death. These are partially resolved conclusions, where the threat is temporarily paused because the conclusion of the story has been reached. However, in each of these stories there remains the intimated threat of Entity B going on to cause further upset should the story be continued. It was argued that these partially resolved conclusions, each one representative of a prototypical short horror plot, are all examples of what Gonzalez described as the ‘It Lives! Ending’ (Gonzalez, 2010: 21).

In the romance genre, the second of the plots of the body, Character A is also brought into conflict with Entity B during the action stage of the plot. In this genre, the conflict comes from prospects of separation and unification, where Entity B is the main romantic interest of Character A. This conflict was shown in the syntactic structure of ‘Pen Friends’ with the developing relationship between Helen (Character A) and Chris (Entity B). As with the horror genre, classic examples of romantic short fiction were discussed to illustrate this structure, including Anton Chekov’s ‘The Helpmate’, O. Henry’s ‘Lickpenny Lover’ and W. J. Lampton’s ‘How the Widow Won the Deacon’. Contemporary examples included Kate Henry’s ‘The Meaning of Things’, Connie Willis’s ‘Now Showing’ and V. Savage’s ‘100 Ways to
Love’. In each of these stories, during the reaction stage, Character A and Entity B encounter a range of obstacles, threatening to impede their prospective relationships, illustrated in ‘Pen Friends’ when Helen and Chris are unable to build on the initial spark of attraction that has been shared between them. The same pattern was identified in each piece of the aforementioned fiction ascribed to the romance genre. It was noted that the love depicted in the romance genre was not limited to romantic love and could encompass a range of relationships, including the platonic and familial, examples of which were shown in stories such as Chekov’s ‘The Helpmate’ and D. Cornwall’s ‘Talking Things Through’.

The final stage of the romance genre, the consequences, invariably concludes with a satisfactory resolution. A distinction was made at this point between whether the resolution was satisfactory for the reader and characters, or solely satisfactory for the reader. This point was illustrated with classic examples from Chekov, considering Olga Semyonovna’s obsessive behaviour in ‘The Darling’ and the miserable conclusion for the eponymous hero of ‘Polinka’. These are stories which are satisfying for the reader but end unhappily for the central characters. Both of these classic stories could be contrasted with contemporary examples of romance stories such as Edmunds’s ‘Tiramisu for Two?’ Inman’s ‘Remembering Rupert’ and Clark’s ‘The May Ball’, all of which conclude with satisfactory resolutions for the characters. With ‘Pen Friends’ being a contemporary piece, the consequences of the story show Helen and Chris set to begin their Happily Ever After ending in a conclusion that is intended to be satisfactory for both readers and characters.
It was also during the discussion of the romance genre that the theme of love was shown to be a semantic aspect of some stories which are usually ascribed to this genre. The titles used to illustrate this point were Virginia Woolf’s ‘The Legacy’, which is syntactically a mystery story, Grahame Greene’s ‘The Blue Film’, which follows the syntactic structure of an erotic story, and Vladimir Nabokov’s ‘Spring in Fialta’, which follows the syntactic pattern of a horror story. In each of these stories, whilst love undeniably remains a semantic theme, the syntactic structure of the narrative belongs to the plot of a different genre.

In the erotic genre, the final genre associated with plots of the body, Character A is, once again, brought into conflict with Entity B where, in this genre, Entity B is the principal sexual interest of Character A. This was demonstrated in ‘Victoria’s Hand’ with Victoria (Character A) being proposed to by Algernon (Entity B). The sexual relationship between the two characters fulfils the requirements of the erotic genre’s reaction stage as the two characters become intimate. The conflict in this genre, a conflict between propriety and impropriety, was seen in ‘Victoria’s Hand’ with the juxtaposition between Algernon’s sense of propriety and decorum, which contrasted against the improper (certainly, for the time) demands made by Victoria. This same pattern was observed repeatedly in contemporary examples of erotica such as Kay Jaybee’s ‘Becky’, Janine Ashbless’s ‘Of High Renown’, and Kathleen Bradean’s ‘Red by Any Other Name’. It was also noted that the erotic genre shared more in common with the syntactic structure of the horror genre than, as had been expected, with the romance genre. This was particularly obvious with the partially resolved conclusion that characterises the consequences stage of both the erotic and the horror narrative: the suggestion that, although
events have finished for the moment, they will continue. Again, this was illustrated with the consequences of ‘Victoria’s Hand’ where, although both Victoria and Algernon’s carnal appetites are sated, the story concluded with the prospect of their unconventional relationship continuing in a similar vein.

The final two supergenres, the mystery and the adventure are, by contrast to the previous three body-focused supergenres, plots of the mind. That is, the narrative is developed through the main character being brought into conflict with various elements of the storyworld, such as an unsolved crime or a situation that needs addressing through action or adventure. To illustrate this, the mystery story ‘Quid Pro Quo’ began with an action stage where Character A (Gordon Lestrade) was brought into conflict with Concept B: the puzzle as to whether Moriarty is manipulating events, or if he is the recipient of benign good fortune. It was acknowledged that this is the typical content of the action stage of a mystery story and, as with previous genres, this parity of syntactic structure was shown using examples such as Dashiell Hammett’s ‘Nightmare Town’, William Campbell Gaunt’s ‘Stolen Star’ and Stephen Greenleaf’s ‘Iris’. The conflict within the mystery story, introduced in the action stage and developed in the reaction stage, comes from the contrast between ignorance and information, where Character A strives to find information to compensate for the ignorance needed to resolve the puzzle that is Concept B. In ‘Quid Pro Quo’ Lestrade gleans this information by being present at various interactions between Moriarty and his acquaintances as the professor goes about his morning duties. In the stories mentioned above by Hammett, Gaunt and Greenleaf, the reaction stage follows this same syntactic structure as the
Character A of each narrative learns more information that helps to solve the puzzle at the centre of the story.

The consequences stage of the mystery story was shown in ‘Quid Pro Quo’ with Moriarty asking Lestrade, ‘And, in future years, should I ever need the intervention of a police officer, would I be able to call on you?’ This is a question which indicates that Moriarty has been making opportunistic use of his acquaintances and it offers the reader a satisfactory resolution to the puzzle. The same pattern is shown with the satisfactory resolution of each of the aforementioned mystery stories, as well as Nerdy’s understanding of her employer’s duplicity in Gillian Flynn’s ‘What Do You Do?’ and including August Dupin acquiring the purloined letter in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, ‘The Purloined Letter’.

The pattern of the mystery genre was also demonstrated in the whodunit, described here as a basic level genre, subordinate to the mystery supergenre. This was shown with the story ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’, a story which followed the syntactic structure of the mystery whilst taking on the basic level genre conventions of the whodunit. In this story, a corpse was found in the opening pages, during the action stage, with the subsequent investigation centring on a fixed number of suspects in a relatively fixed location for the reaction stage. The consequences provided a satisfactory resolution that left the reader with no doubt about the identity of the culprit. Other genres categorised as basic level and subordinate to the mystery supergenre are police procedurals, that is stories that follow an investigation in the clinical way associated with legitimate police investigations, and hard-boiled detective stories, which usually follow the mystery
genre’s syntactic structure but with a semantic content that is rich in earthy realism and written in an unsentimental style.

The adventure plot, like the mystery plot, is also a plot of the mind, with Character A being introduced to goals in the action stage, and going on to overcome a series of obstacles during the reaction stage before the consequences produce a satisfactory resolution. This was illustrated with ‘Buried Treasure’, a parody on the notion of the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure story. In the action stage of this story Character A, the reader, is charged with the task of acquiring a pen. During the reaction stage, the reader has to surmount various obstacles to attain the pen and, finally, the consequences of the story see Character A discovering the pen, even though s/he is unable to claim it. Again, this analysis of the adventure genre was supported by a range of similar texts including ‘Blast from the Past’, a James Bond story written by Raymond Benson, ‘Long Odds’, an Allan Quatermain story written by H. Rider Haggard, and ‘The Capture of Tarzan’ by Edgar Rice Burroughs. Each of these stories begins with an action stage where goals are set, either to avenge a murdered child or to stop ivory traders or to help prevent jungle animals from being hunted by poachers. The obstacles in the reaction stage make these goals difficult but, by the end of the story, the consequences show a satisfactory resolution in each case: Bond has avenged his son’s death; Quatermain has stopped the ivory traders and Tarzan has freed his animal friends and escaped the wrath of the poachers.

Following from the adventure story, the subordinate level genres of the science-fiction and fantasy story were considered. It was noted that the science-fiction and
fantasy genres were both dependent on semantic content rather than their syntactic structure. The stories used here were illustrative of the adventure supergenre, but any of the fiction in this thesis could equally have been written with the semantic content of science fiction or fantasy to produce, for example, a science-fiction horror, or a fantasy romance. It will even be noted that the exaggerated semantic use of advanced internet technology in the whodunit story ‘i-Dunit (BETA)’ could have placed the story within the science-fiction category. These final two stories, ‘The Sorcerer’ and ‘Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People’, were also written to illustrate the influence of semantic content on genre categorisation. Both stories are identical in structure and only differ in that the semantic content of ‘The Sorcerer’ adheres to the expectations of the fantasy genre, whilst ‘Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People’ includes the semantic furnishings of science-fiction.

The eight short stories in this thesis typify the criteria required by the identified genre descriptions. Whilst I have yet to encounter a story that differs from the five supergenre templates with which I am currently working, it should be admitted that I would categorise some stories with a different label to those which have been conventionally applied. Personally, I would have characterised Guy de Maupassant’s ‘The Necklace’ (1884/2012) as a horror story, whereas it is normally listed under the vague rubric of naturalist or realist literature. However, treating the threat of poverty and penury as Entity B in the ‘The Necklace’, the story reads like any conventional horror yarn through typified examples of the action (where the prospect of penury is introduced), reaction (Mathilde and her husband battle

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61 Adventure, Erotic, Horror, Mystery, Romance, Whodunit, Science-fiction and Fantasy.
insurmountable debt to avoid the scandal of admitting that they lost the diamond necklace) and consequences (the prospect of penury transpires to have been an unnecessarily self-inflicted curse). Likewise, Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Summer People’ (1972/2007), usually categorised as one of the Nick Adams narratives, follows the pattern of the typical erotic story: action (Nick is introduced to Kate) reaction (Kate and Nick become intimate) consequences (Nick feels assured he will be able to go out and make further sexual conquests). Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Sphinx’ (1842/1992) is usually described as an example of his horror writing, whereas it really should be categorised as a mystery story, with the puzzle at its centre being resolved in the final paragraph. However, these are small anomalies that one might expect to occur when the distinctive features of genre are balanced between an interpretation based on semantic as opposed to syntactic properties.

In my Introduction, I anticipated that this material would allow for discussion of how plot can be considered as a component part of genre, particularly with relation to the supergenres of the adventure, erotic, horror, mystery and romance stories. I appreciate arguments can be made to show that each genre of fiction is not wholly dependent on its associated archetypal plot, particularly where hybrid genres are discussed. There are romantic adventures and there are mystery horror stories, and doubtless there are innumerable other combinations of supergenres and basic level genres and subordinate level genres that could be cited to challenge this hypothesis. In this collection there are science-fiction and fantasy adventures, as well as a whodunit mystery that contains enough elements of future technology to place it tentatively within the category of science-fiction. In the appendix there is a story that begins with the characteristic action stage from the adventure genre,
continued with the characteristic reaction stage of the erotic genre and concludes with the characteristic consequences of the mystery genre – a story which is structurally unconventional but made coherent through its semantic content.

All of the above still begs the question: so what? If genre can be easily defined by semantic content, why worry about the syntactic structure? Why not simply focus on the furniture of a narrative, such as the ray-guns or the cowboy hats or the hard-drinking detectives, rather than worrying about the relationship between the action, reaction and consequences? To respond to this, it would be prudent to point out that the semantic content of a story can often be a distraction. This is illustrated by the stories written for this thesis, all but one of which contain a pen as a key feature. That is to say, seven of these eight stories can be described as ‘being about a pen’, a semantic statement which provides none of the codification of information a reader or writer can use when trying to define a narrative’s genre. The story that does not contain a pen, a story about a man proposing to his unconventional Victorian fiancé, would be poorly defined in terms of genre, if genre were simply confined to semantic content. Thus, it is acknowledged that a more rounded identification of genre lies in the interaction between the syntactic structure and the semantic content. However, whilst semantic content alone can be a useful indicator of genre at a superficial level, it is the syntactic structure of the supergenre that that allows readers and writers to see the way in which plot is a component part of genre.

I began this investigation with the intention of exploring a perceived relationship between genre and plot. A better understanding of the relationship between plot
and genre, as described here, should help authors gain a better understanding of the fiction they produce. As Fairbairns advises, ‘If you know in advance what is going to happen, it is easier to keep your story tight, focused and short’ (2011: 79). She insists that ‘Tight plotting adds to the intensity of a story, and reduces the risk of distracting your reader with mistakes or inconsistencies’ (2011: 79). Author Donna Levin supports this when she cautions new writers, ‘when you sit down to weave your own perfect tapestry of plot or subplot, you may find your threads getting a little knotted along the way’ (2008: 97). Or, as George Green and Lizzy Kremer recommend, ‘Whatever type of writer you are, having a running summary of the plot is always a good idea – not to tie you down, just to remind you where you thought you were going’ (2007: 22). On a personal level, this syntactic awareness has certainly allowed me to approach the production of commercial fiction in a more efficient manner, as evidenced by the artefacts in Appendices B and C.

It is hoped that the points discussed here might be of value to writers on both theoretical and practical levels. From a theoretical perspective, this approach constitutes a way for writers to analyse genre fiction, especially short fiction, although, as has been shown throughout this thesis, it can equally be used to analyse novels and films. From a practical point of view, it will be noted that, throughout this thesis these templates have been applied to a broad range of texts from a wide variety of authors, as well as the products of my own practice as a writer. Consequently, this approach should provide a useful heuristic device for

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62 The use of these templates in a literature classroom would be more limited, perhaps coming into its own when structuralist approaches to literary texts (e.g. Propp’s formalist analysis) were discussed, along with their disregard for the historical, cultural and social context within which texts actually operate.
other writers and, especially, creative writing students. It should also enable them to see what it is that makes their own fiction successful (or not), from a genre perspective. Beyond that, this approach should help writers structure their stories in a more focused manner and, through the various templates that show how to craft work for particular markets, assist them in the production of commercial fiction. Returning to Bradbury’s analogy for a final time, it is hoped that this work might help writers redraft with a stronger focus on the direction that the plot's footsteps have taken through the snow, and with a better grasp of the characteristics that shape each footprint.
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Appendix A
Zombie Attack on the Planet of the Scorpion People

Commander Hardman placed the pen in a hermetically sealed sleek black box and handed it to White. The box was decorated with the official FoSP gold seal from the Federation of Sapient Planets.

“Commander?” White was confused. “What’s this for?”

Hardman waved him silent and used his mobile phone to take a picture of White holding the boxed pen. The commander seemed inordinately fond of photographs. The walls of his office were decorated with a series of his collected images that each showed Hardman’s association with fame and power. On the wall behind his desk there was a framed picture of Hardman shaking hands with the Pope. Beside that was a picture of Hardman embracing the King of Procyon. Both images were dwarfed in size by a larger picture of Hardman shaking hands with a captain that White didn’t recognise. Given the fact that Hardman and the anonymous captain shared the same broad-chested build and identical lantern-jaws, it seemed safe to guess that this was Hardman and a favoured son.

“Take the pen with you,” Hardman said. “Give it to Freya Tyr. It’s our official gift to the scorpion people.”

*Scorpion people.*

White winced at Hardman’s lack of cultural sensitivity.

Gliese 667 Cc was a colonised mesoplanet in the triple star system of the Scorpius constellation. Two centuries earlier, whilst protesting against exploitative mining practices sanctioned by Earth’s government, the Gliese 667 colonists had declared independence.

They claimed they had been exploited for long enough.
They withdrew from the Federation of Sapient Planets and renamed their planet Asgard. Major continents and countries were renamed to honour various aspects of Norse mythology. White was familiar with a city named Valhalla, a transportation hub named Jotunheim and a mining community in Hliðskjálf.

And yet, for all the seriousness of the situation in the eyes of the colonists, the name change was treated as a joke on Earth. Astronomers and cartographers refused to call the planet Asgard. The more vocal said that Gliese 667 was in the Scorpius constellation and the crueller commentators began to refer to the colonists as ‘scorpion people’.

The name became a common insult. More people on Earth knew the Gliese 667 colonists as ‘scorpion people’ rather than Asgardians. And it seemed, each time the colonists encountered that particular pejorative, the entire planet of Gliese 667 celebrated their rejection of FoSP and renewed their resolve to remain independent.

White checked the inscription on the pen to assure himself that the words ‘scorpion people’ weren’t tactlessly engraved on the casing. His mission wasn’t particularly sensitive but he didn’t want to run the risk of instigating a diplomatic event. Not whilst he was stuck on the planet.

He fixed Hardman with a stiff glare. “Please don’t use the phrase ‘scorpion people’ on any unsecured communication.”

Commander Hardman’s eyes sparkled with ill-natured mirth. “Don’t tell me you’re a scorpion-lover.”

White stiffened.

He rubbed at the tension headache throbbing at the nape of his neck.
“You’ve asked me to lead my team to a planet that seceded from the Federation of Sapient Planets two generations ago,” he said tiredly. “The remnants of the Asgardian government are working with us. It’s hoped we can share some of our developments in medical technologies in exchange for some of the diamonds that have always made their planet so exploitable.”

The humour disappeared from Hardman’s eyes. His nostrils curled with the familiar sneer of disgust that White had seen on the face of every military commander who’d ever called him a scorpion-loving liberal.

Hardman opened his mouth but White didn’t allow him to interrupt.

“According to our biologists,” White went on, “the plague that’s forced Gliese 667 to open up negotiations could be a Z-class microbe.”

“Those rumours about a Z-class microbe are unconfirmed.”

White shrugged. “When you factor in the detail that the planet is nearly twenty-four light years away from here, which means I’ve got a full day’s worth of traveling ahead of me, I’m sure you can understand why I might appear a little fractious.”

If Commander Hardman felt any sympathy it didn’t appear on his features.

“Are your team ready?”

“There are nine of us. I’ve got two field biologists, two engineers, two ex-military medics and a pair of security officers. We start our way through the first leg of the transportation arches this afternoon.”

Hardman extended a hand.

“Travel safely,” he said. “See if you can save the Scor-” He stopped himself mid-word and flashed an apologetic grin at White’s surfacing scowl. “See if you
can save the colonists,” he amended. “And don’t forget to bring back lots and lots of diamonds.”

White shook the man’s hand and then departed. He left the office quickly because he knew, if he stayed too long in Hardman’s company, the urge to punch the commander would prove irresistible.

*

They were using military transportation protocols which allowed them to make the journey in the timeliest fashion. White had the shotgun seat of their FoSP issue Volkswagen Camper, whilst Senior Engineer Sharpe sat behind the wheel. In the rear of the antiquated van sat the rest of the team, grumbling quietly to themselves as they speculated on what they would find at their destination.

“Why the hell do we have to use these dilapidated old buckets of rust?” The question was called from Junior Medical Officer Turner. He was an ex-marine and his broad bulk filled the chair immediately behind White. His eyes were beer-bong bloodshot and he slammed one large, meaty fist against the metal panel by his side.

White flinched as the vehicle shook from the blow.

“Volkswagen Campers are a surprisingly reliable vehicle,” Sharpe explained brightly. “This one is large enough to carry all nine of us. Since we’re using the roof rack it also conveys all of our kit. Not only is it capable and accommodating, not only do the rubber tyres keep us insulated from the electromagnetic rays on the transportation highway, but the camper’s incredibly reliable. In the whole
history of using transportation archways we’ve never had a single Volkswagen Camper break down whilst going through the transportation arches.”

White braced himself as they approached the first transportation archway. He stared through the windscreen at the large metal frame that stood gold and silver against the Earth’s summer sky. His gaze fell on the haze of the road where it melted in the centre of the arch. The world beyond that haze was only a blur, like an out-of-focus picture that remained indistinct no matter how hard he squinted.

“I don’t trust these damned things,” Turner murmured. “You hear horror stories.”

Clenching his teeth and glaring at the arch, White said nothing. He could feel the rapid quickening of his heartbeat. When they passed under the shadow of the arch their universe turned grey.

“My department is working on long range versions of these transporters,” Sharpe explained as they drove them through the archway.

The transportation transition was smooth and unremarkable. It wasn’t so much a change of road as a change of scenery. They had gone from a sunny summer’s afternoon in Colchester to a scene of awful interstellar beauty.

“The archways we’ll be working on will be larger,” Sharpe went on. “They’ll be more reliable and able to operate over greater distances.”

White ignored the disquiet of nausea sitting at the back of his throat. It would take a couple of queasy minutes for Sharpe to navigate the artificial road that led from Earth’s archway through to the other side of the archway at a waystation on Alpha Centauri.

The universe around them broiled and shifted.
Vision outside the vehicle was almost obscured by the arc of a dangerously close moon. Through the side windows he could see distant galaxies sitting as an innocuous background to their journey. White hid his unease behind a show of interest in Sharpe’s comment.

“Long-range arches? This first one takes us across more than four and a half light years. How much further could we manage with long-range transporter arches?”

Sharpe laughed. “There’s scope to travel anywhere in the conquered universes with the new range of arches. I have a colleague that’s trying to do something with the communication relays on the existing transportation archways. At the moment communication technology is so fast it’s almost instantaneous. With the existing systems we can hold a conversation between Cassiopeia and Ophiuchus 70 in real-time. But that’s only audio and visual communication. As soon as the terabytes per second of the bandwidth can be modified to cope with—”

Turner yawned.

It was a sound that was meant to be offensive. When Sharpe fell silent, and concentrated on driving the camper toward the glowing green archway lights at the Alpha Centauri end of the transportation highway, Turner smiled as though he was pleased with himself.

“Are you tired?” White asked.

“I’m bored.” Turner spoke the words as though they were a challenge. One of the female engineers at the rear of the van snickered at his boldness. “If I’ve got to endure a full day of this sort of conversation,” Turner went on, “it will be a relief to contract the zombie virus on the planet of the scorpion people.”
White nodded. All of the camper’s passengers were watching the exchange and he was pleased that he had everyone’s attention.

He smashed a fist into Turner’s jaw.

There wasn’t sufficient room for White to deliver maximum force to the blow but he figured he was holding back enough nervous tension to make the punch count.

The impact was hard enough to make a cracking sound. A look of surprise flashed across Turner’s face. And then his eyes rolled to stare upwards and he slumped unconscious into his seat.

“Jesus,” whispered one of the engineers.

Calmly, White asked, “Did everyone receive my email explaining vocabulary guidelines for this assignment?”

There was a hasty murmur of assent.

“Just to be sure that those rules can’t be misinterpreted,” White told the team, “The phrase ‘scorpion people’ is not to be used by any member of this expedition.”

McCance, the team’s senior medic, slipped into the seat beside Turner and gave his unconscious colleague a cursory examination. “He’s out cold.”

White shrugged and waved the matter aside. Speaking to the rest of the crew he said, “We’re being invited to a planet that’s had a turbulent relationship with Earth and the Federation of Sapient Planets. I don’t care about anyone’s personal politics. I don’t care about anyone’s stupid prejudices. But I will not let this mission be jeopardised by the stupidity of a playground insult that doesn’t need to be used. Is that understood?”

McCance regarded him doubtfully.
Sharpe and the rest of the team grumbled their agreement.

Checking his watch, White realised they had another twenty-three hours to endure as they took the Volkswagen camper through another two dozen archways. He winced inwardly as he realised the number of light years they were traversing didn’t satisfactorily convey how long the journey would now feel. He didn’t doubt that each and every one of his subordinates would now be labelling him as the worst sort of scorpion-lover.

*

McCance drove the second leg of the journey. Aside from being an ex-military medic he also had an MA in Astronavigation and kept a steady hand behind the wheel.

White took the third leg of the journey.

Sharpe got back behind the wheel for the final stretch.

They stopped at various planetary outposts to change driving positions and grab short bathroom breaks. White had heard good things about the cuisine at the Procyon military archway and he insisted they stopped there for lunch.

When Turner regained consciousness White waited for the next respite stop and stepped outside the camper van with the junior medic. He apologised for punching him and offered his hand.

Grudgingly, Turner accepted the apology. White thought he could see flint in the man’s eye. It was an expression that said Turner would be watching for a chance to get even and White accepted he would need to be vigilant whilst in the company of the junior medic.

As if the mission wasn’t already filled with potential dangers.
Aside from occasional comfort breaks, the journey was uneventful. If he’d been asked to describe his day, travelling twenty-four light years in twenty-four consecutive hours, White would have said it was interminably long and wholly draining.

He was yawning by the time they passed through the green glow of the final gateway. After so much time in the van he was anxious to escape from the stale air of the vehicle and the simmering hostility of his team. He desperately wanted to bed down for the night and, hopefully, awake refreshed in a dozen or so hours.

His gut told him that wasn’t likely to happen.

It was night on Gliese 667.

The Volkswagen’s high beams cut brightly through the darkness. A crowd of glaring faces were illuminated on the road ahead of them. Seemingly angered by the light, they turned away and moved to the paved edges of the road. They became rippling shadows that shifted at the edges of the dark being cut by the headlights.

“Captain,” Sharpe muttered. “I think we have a situation.”

White blinked the sleep from his eyes and tried to make sense of what he was seeing. There was a sea of shifting shadows beyond the headlight beams. He could hear a growl of subhuman voices murmuring as the Volkswagen Camper drove along the road.

“What the hell is this, Sharpe?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.” Sharpe stiffened in his seat and White could see he was going to slam his foot on the brakes.

“Keep driving,” White insisted.

“But-”
“Keep driving.” White said the words with more volume and conviction this time. “That’s an order, Officer Sharpe. I don’t think it would be advisable to stop in these conditions.”

He punched the communications panel on the Volkswagen’s dashboard and waited until a telephonist asked if she could help with his enquiry.

“This is Captain White from Earth on behalf of FoSP,” he barked. “The mission team have arrived on Gliese 667. I need to speak with Freya Tyr.”

Outside the Volkswagen the headlamps picked up the shadows of more shuffling figures scrambling slowly to the sanctuary of their darkness. When the beams fell on individuals they lit a chilling spectre of broken humanity. The features were invariably gaunt and expressionless. Each figure moved with an artless gait that looked painful, awkward and unnatural. White stared into the impossibly dark stretches of night that lay beyond the headlamps.

He wondered how many plague victims he was seeing.

He wondered how many victims he wasn’t seeing.

“What the hell is this?” murmured one of the engineers.

White ignored her. “Keep driving, Officer Sharpe. Keep driving.”

The purr of the engine was a constant growl. They moved slowly through the night with the vast crowds seeming desperate to avoid the touch of the high beams. Outside the vehicle, above the purr of the engine, they could hear a dull choir of groans and moans.

“Captain White?” A woman’s voice came through the van’s intercom. “This is Freya Tyr. Where are you?”

White glanced at Sharpe.

Sharpe looked down to the dashboard console
“We’ve just arrived on Gliese 667,” he explained. He glanced again at the navigator console and added, “We entered through the Jotnar archway.”

“My apologies,” Freya Tyr said. “The security of the Jotnar military base was compromised this afternoon. I should have contacted you to explain the situation but there have been so many other.”

“You’ve got compromised security on a military base?” White could hear his tone was a mixture of incredulity and accusation. “What sort of civil unrest have you got here, Freya Tyr?” He stopped himself from shouting, “And why the hell weren’t we warned about this before we arrived?”

There was a moment’s silence from Freya Tyr’s end of the conversation.

“Didn’t Commander Hardman tell you?” she asked eventually. She released a short, sharp bark of laughter. To White it sounded like the cry of a woman on the verge of a hysterical breakdown. “This isn’t civil unrest,” Freya Tyr explained. “This is our plague. Asgard is infected with a Z-class microbe. Contamination is pandemic.”

* 

White handed over the conversation to Sharpe as Freya Tyr gave directions that would take the camper van from Jotnar to Aesir. Glancing warily outside the window White saw that they were driving past hundreds of individuals, each one shambling aimlessly through the night. The scene was enough to make goosebumps prickle on his forearms. He glanced into the rear of the van and asked McCance, “What do you know about Z-class microbes?”
“They’re nasty damned things, Sir,” McCance admitted. “They were identified in the latter part of the twenty-first century and called Z-class because the symptoms were reminiscent of those found in zombie films.”

“Seriously?”

White flicked his gaze to the camper van’s windows. A hand slapped against the side of the vehicle making them all jump. He had been about to make a remark dismissing the childishness of discussing zombie movies. When a deathly pale face loomed against the vehicle’s window he didn’t feel sufficiently bold to discount the concept. The figure pounding on the side of the vehicle could only have been described as a zombie. White recoiled from the stare of the creature’s viciously stupid expression.

“Affirmative,” McCance said. “There are similarities between the plague victims and zombies. But the word ‘zombie’ isn’t technically accurate. They’re not really the living dead.”

White wouldn’t allow himself to sigh with relief. He didn’t want the rest of the crew to hear any symptoms of his nervousness. He realised his heartbeat was accelerated. His mouth was dry and it suddenly felt chilly inside the van.

“The microbe doesn’t actually reanimate corpses,” McCance explained. “The microbe attacks the living and shuts down part of the brain functions. The infected, unless isolated, hospitalised and treated, are usually found shambling together in hoards. It’s a health issue because they’re a contagion risk. They also present an immediate physical danger to those they encounter because they’ve been known to physically assault the uninfected.”

Outside a man with a blank staring gaze snatched at their passing vehicle.

“They do look like zombies from horror movies,” White marvelled.
McCance shrugged. “They’re not the walking dead. But they might as well be.” He nodded toward Turner and said, “Jim studied Z-class mutations when he was earning his medical stripes, Sir. He can tell you more about them.”

Turner regarded White with a blank expression. He was still sitting in the same seat where he’d been positioned when White punched him unconscious.

White tried to remember why it had seemed like a good idea to demonstrate his authority by putting the medic’s lights out. He asked, “Is this situation treatable?”

“It looks bad,” Turner said carefully. He glanced out of the window and added, “It won’t be bad for us. It won’t harm us in any way. But this is a pretty serious situation for the scorpion people.”

“I thought I’d warned you about calling them.”


“How bad?”

“Fatal. Z-class microbes like this one attack the central nervous system. Without treatment irreparable damage can happen within a couple of hours.” He glanced out of the window and said, “I’d guess these guys have been suffering for a lot longer than a couple of hours.”

“Are we going to end up like that?” The question came from one of the female engineers.

Turner shook his head. “The infection shouldn’t affect us. Earth’s population has been immunised against most Z-class microbes. But that immunisation programme was never taken out to the far reaches of the universe.”
“You say it shouldn’t affect us,” White repeated. “Does that mean there’s some risk that it might?”

Turner shrugged. “There are lunatics in laboratories constantly tweaking with DNA strands. It wouldn’t take much to rewrite the coding of a Z-class microbe. I once wrote a paper on how hypothetically easy it would be to—”

“Why wasn’t this immunisation taken out to colonists?” White asked.

“Z-class microbes are an artificial construct,” Turner explained. “Once the infections had been eliminated through immunisation it would’ve been a senseless waste of resources to immunise every colony in the universe against a microbe they were never going to encounter. It would have been like re-immunising everyone on Earth against smallpox, poliomyelitis or AIDS. Once they were killed on Earth the diseases no longer existed. There was no point in an immunisation programme.”

White glared through the window of the camper van at the shambling hoards that filled the shadows of Gliese 667. He shifted his gaze from McCance to Turner.

“If the disease no longer exists, why is our van surrounded by zombies?”

“Good question,” McCance acknowledged.

“And I’m working on an answer to that one,” Turner said. He brandished a tablet and added, “But I’ll need access to historical records before I can say one way or the other.”

White climbed back into the seat at the front of the camper and watched as Sharpe guided their vehicle along a road with signposts for Vanir.

“I thought we were headed to Aesir?”

“We are,” Sharpe told him. “But we’re going via the scenic route.”
“How wonderful.”

Freya Tyr’s voice came from the dashboard. “Our sensors show that the Jotnar-to-Aesir transportation archway has been compromised.” She sighed heavily and said, “I’m sorry we wasted your time with this mission, Captain White.”

“Wasted our time?”

“The infection is a category eight pandemic. I can’t see your team will be able to do anything.”

“Category eight?” White was stunned. Behind him he heard either McCance or Turner whistle in disbelief.

He was not a medic or a biologist but he’d taken the liberty of consulting notes on the pandemic severity index. He’d thought the list topped at category five with a two percent fatality rate to a global population. He didn’t dare imagine the severity of a category eight outbreak.

“Freya Tyr,” he began. “My team need access to the planet’s historical medical records”

“Of course.”

“And we-”

He got no further. He was going to explain how his instructions were to attack the plague from two angles. His team of biologists and medics were going to immunise all those who had so far managed to avoid the disease. His engineers were going to establish the most appropriate way to get treatment to those who were infected. He was going to tell Freya Tyr that his plans were to establish a headquarters in Aesir, eradicate the infection from that area, then move treatments through Vanir and finally into Jotnar.
He was in the process of trying to articulate those thoughts when the bullet shattered the windscreen and blew off the top of Sharpe’s head.

*

Turner’s reactions were incredible.

White could see the man’s marine training pay dividends as he urged the engineers to flatten themselves against the floor to avoid being hit by any further gunshots. McCance had pulled a concealed revolver from inside his jacket and was squatting down on his haunches at the rear of the van studying every angle and preparing to return fire. The two security personnel were arming themselves but they seemed to look to McCance for leadership in this crisis.

**McCance has a weapon?** The development surprised White. It also scared him when he realised it was likely that Turner was also armed. **Had he punched an armed ex-marine?**

Without Sharpe’s control, the Volkswagen veered to one side. A single bump, White suspected they had driven over one of the zombies, and the movement shifted Sharpe’s lifeless legs from the clutch and the accelerator. The van lurched to a juddering halt.

“What the hell is going on?” one of the biologists demanded.

McCance pushed him to the floor. “Keep your head down, soldier. I want everyone keeping their head down until I’ve established what’s going on here.”

White ignored McCance’s instructions. Grabbing hold of Sharpe’s shoulder, ignoring the shiver of disquiet that touched him when the man’s damaged head lolled against his arm, White pulled Sharpe from the driver’s seat.

“You need to keep your head down, Captain White,” McCance told him.
His voice was stiff with impatience.

Hands grabbed at the window. One enthusiastic zombie scrambled to climb into the van through the shattered hole where the windscreen had been. The upper half of his body was in the vehicle before White noticed and punched him away.

“Captain’s got a decent right hook,” Turner observed. “No wonder I didn’t see it coming.”

“Keep your head down, Captain White,” McCance repeated. “We’ve not established the source of the gunfire and we’ve not had a chance to neutralise the threat.”

White wrestled Sharpe’s corpse into the passenger seat and looked up in time to see another zombie clamouring to climb into the van through the space where the windscreen had been. Before White could draw his fist back, Turner had stepped to his side and pushed the attacker out of the vehicle.

“Keep your head down, Captain White,” McCance insisted. “We have no idea who’s firing at us.”

White twisted the ignition and brought the Volkswagen to life. The engine roared as he revved it. The noise was enough to make the crowd of zombies move warily back from the vehicle.

“Captain White,” McCance hissed. “Sir. Please.”

“I’m not getting my head down,” White snapped. “I need to get us out of here.”

“But if we’re still under fire-” McCance started.

“We’re not under fire,” White broke in. “It was a single shot. It was probably an accident or a fluke or something.” In his mind’s eye he had an image of one of
the zombies finding a loaded handgun and operating the weapon through an accident of habit. “If we were still under fire we would have-”

He got no further.

A bullet cut off his words.

* 

White had no idea how much time had passed when he came back to consciousness. He stared blearily around his surroundings and tried to make sense of where he was. There were stark lights overhead. The walls were white and the sterile air was undeniably medicinal.

*How the hell had he ended up in a hospital?*

A cool night’s breeze wafted through the open window where McCance stood staring out into the night.

“Easy does it,” Turner said as White tried to get up. “You’re still recovering.”

“What happened?”

“You’d just finished telling us that no one was shooting at us. We’re currently treating you for a gunshot wound and an overdose of dramatic irony.”

McCance stepped away from the window and said, “This is the bastard who shot you.” He nodded towards a man tied to a chair at the foot of White’s bed.

The man wore a dark green military uniform. His face was a bruised and battered mess, as though he had badly lost a fight. His lantern-jaw was scratched and bloody. His jacket was ripped across the broad chest to reveal a deep and unsightly scar. Beneath the bruises, White thought, there was something about the man’s face that seemed familiar.

“Who the hell is he?”
“He won’t say.”

“What was he doing?”

Turner shrugged again. “He claims he was trying to shoot zombies so we had a clear run to the Aesir archway.”

White raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“I didn’t believe him either,” McCance admitted. “Which is why I’ve got his image being processed through our database of face recognition software. We’ll know who he is within the hour.”

McCance paused as his words were interrupted by the ringing of his mobile phone. He held up a finger, apologise and turned away to take the call.

White turned to Turner. “Where the hell are we? And where’s the rest of the team? Did everyone else make it off the camper van safely?”

“Sharpe’s dead,” Turner admitted. “But the rest of the team are uninjured. After you were shot I left the vehicle to find our gunman. McCance drove the Volkswagen here, to the abandoned Jotnar medical research facility. The place is operating on minimal resources but we’ve managed to make it relatively secure. Lieutenant McCance has some of the biologists working in the laboratory trying to analyse the microbe.”

McCance stepped back to the side of the bed and handed White his mobile phone. “Freya Tyr,” he explained. “She wanted to talk with you as soon as you recovered.”

White took the phone and began the awkward process of trying to climb out of the bed whilst holding McCance’s phone and battling against Turner’s protests.

“This wasn’t the welcome to Asgard that I had planned for you, Captain White.”
“McCance sent you the image of this gunman. Do you know who he is?”

“We’re still trying to identify him,” Freya Tyr admitted. “It doesn’t help that his face has taken a pretty severe beating.”

“You know we’ve taken refuge in an abandoned Jotnar medical research facility?”

“Yes. Your Lieutenant McCance relayed that information in his earlier call.”

“We’ll establish this as our working base for now,” White decided.

“Are you sure?” Freya Tyr sounded surprised. “We were expecting you here at Aesir. We were going to make room for you in the Valhalla medical research centre.”

“No,” White said firmly. “I need to do something about this situation and try to execute a solution to this pandemic. Whilst it would be pleasant to make your acquaintance the only thing I’ve currently got to give you is a ceremonial pen.”

She laughed drily. “Another pen?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry,” Freya Tyr sounded as though she smiling wearily. “I was being ungracious. When Commander Hardman visited here last year-”

“Hardman visited here?”

“-he kindly gave us a pen. He even insisted we use that pen for signing the official trade agreement he had negotiated.”

White’s stomach tightened with apprehension. How could he have been so blind? “What trade agreement?”

“Hardman Incorporated invested heavily in our medical facilities in exchange for exclusive planetary mining rights.”

“Exclusive planetary mining rights?”
White could hear himself echoing Freya Tyr’s words and realised he likely sounded foolish. He could see McCance and Turner studying him sceptically. McCance was mouthing a question. White shook his head to indicate he didn’t yet have any answers. Or, to be more accurate, he didn’t yet have answers he wished to share.

“We were still in the negotiation stage,” Freya Tyr elaborated. “Our environmental lobby wouldn’t allow Hardman to start mining until they had assurances that there’d be no detrimental impact on the planet.”

“I see,” White growled. He didn’t bother to point out that mining would not cause a detrimental impact on a planet where the population had been wiped out by a Z-class microbe pandemic. He motioned to McCance and said, “I need one of the team to do an immediate study of Freya Tyr’s ceremonial pen.”

“Negative, Captain. The team are working on more important things than-”

“That was an order,” White broke in.

He could feel a twisting in his gut that he knew had nothing to do with the pain from his gunshot wound or the medication soaring through his bloodstream. He sat up on the bed. Pushing Turner’s protests aside he managed to climb from beneath the covers.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“I need you to go through those historical records Freya Tyr opened for you.”

“Negative, Captain,” McCance told him. “Our priorities are to establish a secure base and then address the plague controls.”
“No,” White said firmly. “I’ve just told you what our priorities are.” He spoke into his phone and said, “Where is the pen that Hardman originally brought? It’s here in Jotnar, isn’t it?”

Freya Tyr released a short surprised laugh. “How did you know the agreement was signed in Jotnar?”

White shook his head and threw the phone back to McCance. “Get the location of the pen and then organise to have it retrieved.”

McCance glared at him for a moment. “Affirmative, Captain.”

“And,” White was out of the bed and trying to locate his boots. “Ask for a cache of fifty colourless five carat diamonds to be dispatched here as soon as possible.”

“You should be resting,” Turner insisted.

White waved the idea aside. “Before I was shot we were discussing how this outbreak came about,” he remembered. “I need you to go through the historical records of the outbreak and tell me where it came from.”

“Come on,” Turner groaned. “Surely there’s more pressing matters for me to be looking into other than historical records?”

“The only other thing I need is footage of this bastard looking beaten,” White said, gesturing toward the man at the foot of his bed. “Other than that there’s nothing more important to this mission than locating ground zero of the microbe infection.” He switched his gaze from Turner to McCance and said, “I know exactly what you’re going to find. But I’d like my suspicions confirmed before I take any action.”

*
It was three days later when White called Hardman’s image on the view screen. “Did you receive the sample of diamonds, Commander Hardman?”

Hardman nodded. “An impressive cache, Captain. How’s it going with the scorpion people?”

*Scorpion people.*

White’s hand stiffened in the act of shaping a fist. He forced himself not to sneer. “We got a lucky break,” he admitted.

Hardman smiled. “Really?”

“Turner and the biologists worked out a solution. They developed a vaccine.”

“Good for Turner.” Despite the words, Hardman did not sound delighted. His features seemed stiff with thinly concealed anger. “How did he manage that?”

“There’s been a huge loss of life on this planet but Turner’s effecting a treatment based on Earth’s dementia medication and we’re seeing some impressive results. If it wasn’t for his horrific acts of biological terrorism he’s committed I’d say Turner deserved a citation from the Federation of Sapient Planets.”

“Biological terrorism? What the hell has he done?”

“Sorry, Commander. You were asking how he managed to obtain a solution. He identified ground zero. He discovered where the microbe came from.”

Hardman’s eyes narrowed. He was a shrewd man and it was obvious he understood there was a subtext to the conversation. He studied White with sullen hostility and asked, “Where does Turner think the microbe came from?”

“He thinks it was a deliberate act of infection from Earth.”
“That’s one hell of an accusation. That’s the sort of talk that’s going to make the scorpion people really dislike everyone back here.”

Scorpion people. This time White couldn’t disguise his sneer of contempt for the superior officer.

“Turner makes quite a compelling argument,” White admitted. “He’s shown me enough evidence to prove that the microbe is manufactured. Biologically, there’s evidence to suggest the microbe couldn’t have come from Asgard. The most convincing piece of evidence is the Hardman Inc coding in the DNA. The microbe came from someone who had access to facilities in your company, Commander Hardman.”

Hardman’s face was carved from stone.

“How very curious.”

“Our team even found examples of the original microbe, the unduplicated microbe, on the pen that you delivered to the planet six months ago.”

“What are you trying to say, White?”

White took a deep breath. “The only explanation for how this plague began is that it was created in one of your laboratories, Commander Hardman. The only explanation for how it got here is that it was personally delivered to this planet by you.”

“That’s one hell of an accusation.” Hardman sounded as though he had detached himself from the passion of the moment. “Are you able to support that accusation with any evidence?”

“We have a confession from your son,” White admitted. “Although I’m not sure that would be wholly admissible in any court that didn’t approve of torture.”

“My son?”
"The son you had waiting for us here on Gliese 667. The son who killed Sharpe and tried to take me out. The son whose photograph is on the wall in your office. Do I really need to remind you about the identity of your son, Commander Hardman? Especially when we have to discuss Turner’s acts of biological terrorism."

Hardman pursed his lips. “You mentioned these acts of biological terrorism before,” he said. “What are you babbling about?”

“Turner thinks you used the ceremonial pen as a way to get microbes onto this planet. He claims, because the microbes have no effect on people from Earth, you and your pen were the ideal courier.”

“Can Turner support this accusation with anything resembling evidence?”

“Aside from the confession we beat out of your son?”

“Aside from the allegations of any unspecified torture victims, yes.”

“Turner claims you’ll be admitting your guilt within twenty-four hours.”

“And why does he think I’ll be doing that?”

“I thought I’d said,” White frowned. “Turner has committed some atrocious acts of biological terrorism.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

For the first time, White could hear the snap of anger in Hardman’s voice. It took an effort of willpower not to grin.

“Turner did some structural work on your manufactured microbe,” White explained. “He adjusted those component issues that made it such a danger to the colonists of Gliese 667. He changed the structure so that it’s now a danger to those of us who were born and raised on Earth.” White shivered dramatically and said, “The effects are pretty frightening."
“Jesus Christ, White. That’s insanity.”

“Let me show you a clip of someone infected with the modified microbe,” White said. “You’ll probably recognise him. The family resemblance is striking.”

He pressed play on the console. A brief video clip, no more than five seconds, played on the screen. It showed Hardman junior, his face bloodied, his eyes wide and staring, and his mouth drooling in a senseless yawn.

“What the hell have you done to him?” Hardman demanded.

“I’ve just told you. Turner modified the microbe you sent up here.”

“That’s insane. What would happen if he found a way to send it to Earth?”

“He did find a way,” White said quietly. “The microbe was transported to Earth in a transparent coating on those diamonds we sent you. I’m assuming you’ve handled them.”

Hardman blanched. “Is this some sort of joke?”

“No joke, Commander Hardman.”

“What are you expecting me to do?”

“Turner and I discussed that,” White admitted. “I think you’ll break down, admit your crimes and come here begging for the antidote.” He held up a small vial and added, “We’ve already got an antidote made up. Turner thinks you’ll carry on pretending you had nothing to do with the outbreak here until the infection melts your brain and starts to kill those you love and cherish on Earth. Have you been in touch with any family or friends since you took charge of the consignment of diamonds?”

“You unconscionable bastard,” Hardman whispered.

White nodded. “You know where we are if you want to discuss antidotes.”

He pressed the button on his desk to sever the connection.
Once the communication screen had gone blank, Freya Tyr sat beside him.

“What do you really think Hardman will do?” she asked.

“I think we’ll see Hardman driving into Jotnar at some point tomorrow.”

“It’s a hell of a risk, isn’t it?”

White shook his head. “We’ve not really sent a virus back to Earth,” he admitted. “But Hardman won’t know that. He’s seen evidence of his son acting as though he’s infected, so he believes there’s a virus. He’s got a threat from us and he probably thinks we’re as unscrupulous as he is.”

“What will you do if he does come here?” Freya Tyr said. “Are you going to offer him a fake antidote in exchange for his confession?”

White shrugged. “Perhaps.” He nodded toward the camp of recovering microbe survivors and said, “I think, when Hardman gets here, he can discuss his need for a cure with some representatives from the scorpion people.”

THE END
Appendix B
“Take this kiss upon the brow / And in parting from you now / Thus much let me avow...”

Ken recognised the familiar opening to Poe’s ‘Dream within a Dream.’ It was one of his favourite poems. Under other circumstances he might have settled back in his seat, savoured another sip of the late bottled vintage port he was nursing, and relished the performance of the piece with his eyes half closed and his attention fixed on the rhythm of the words. But this was Mike Warner delivering the poem, and Ken was attending the open mic event with the express purpose of watching and learning from a master performance poet.

It was an understatement to say he was smitten.

Mike Warner had sea-blue eyes, sharpened by the wickedest of devilish twinkles. His smile was more than just likeable: it was instantly loveable. His unshaven jaw was square, manly and eminently kissable and he held himself with the deportment of a veteran catwalk model. Dressed in an inky black shirt, open at the throat to reveal a fistful of dark curls atop his broad, manly chest, he looked too attractive to be a genuine poet. It was almost like watching a handsome stage performer taking on the role of a performance artiste.

“All that we see or seem,” Mike told the audience. “Is but a dream within a dream.”

Ken suppressed a shiver.
The man had a gift for the theatrical that went beyond the abilities of most open mic poets. He lowered his voice to deliver the important phrases, making his audience lean in and concentrate on what was being said. He pitched his delivery so the focus seemed to be on the words rather than the rhyme. If it hadn’t been for the intensity of the message he was conveying, Ken would have described Mike’s tone as almost conversational. But he knew this delivery was far more profound than mere conversational.

“I stand amid the roar / of a surf tormented shore…”

For the briefest moment, Ken considered standing up and walking out. What was the point in attempting to write and perform poetry when he knew he could never do it to a fraction of the standard that Mike Warner exuded on every occasion? If it hadn’t been for the importance of his mission, and the fact that he didn’t want to miss the delivery of this poem’s final lines, Ken would have slipped discreetly from the room at that point and given up on his quest.

“Is all that we see or seem,” Mike asked, “but a dream within a dream?”

There was a moment’s silence as the audience pondered this question. Then Mike was stepping back from the microphone. He was grinning broadly as the room burst into a round of applause that was sharp and almost aggressive in its enthusiasm.

The stage was nothing more than an elevated platform against one wall of the pub. With bare brick at the back, and a spot-lit microphone at the front, it was an unremarkable area that allowed the focus to be on the performer rather than any other distraction. A dozen or so tables were scattered around the darkened pub, each table populated with a microcosm of the appreciative audience, all of them clapping and cheering for Mike Warner.
Ken didn’t notice that he was also clapping enthusiastically until his palms began to hurt from the impact and exertion. Even when he acknowledged the discomfort he didn’t bother to slow himself. He grinned in Mike’s direction and continued to slap his hands together hard and loud.

“OK,” Mike called, shouting over the applause. “That was one of my favourite poems from Eddie Poe, and I’ve shared that because tonight’s theme is dreams. You’ve all known about this for the past month or more and, if you’ve got poems on the theme of dreams, we look forward to hearing them.”

The audience were subdued to a murmur of whispered conversations.

Mike consulted a red book that he’d pulled from the back pocket of his pants. He held it in one large, broad hand. After peering at the open page he said, “First poet on the microphone this evening, all the way from Canal Street, is the debonair Donna Buckley.”

There was a smattering of applause, nothing compared to the ovation that had greeted Mike’s performance, and a mousy blonde stumbled toward the microphone.

Her entire posture was an apology for being there. She had round shoulders, her eyes were frightened prisoners behind huge spectacles, and she held a trembling sheet of crumpled, correction-scribbled paper in a shivering fist. When she eventually reached the centre of the stage she glanced nervously around the room, cringed, and then coughed into the microphone. The sound was sickly and unpleasant.

“I was experimenting with form when I wrote this one,” she mumbled.

Ken zoned out.
Mike Warner and Donna Buckley lived on opposite ends of the performance spectrum. Where Mike was unforgettable, Donna was unremarkable.

He found himself staring at Mike Warner and trying to study the man critically. It was not an unpleasant task. Mike was tall and larger than life. The mop of his dark hair was gelled into a stylish tousle. His smile was broad and engaging. His physique wasn’t exactly athletic but, in his open-throated inky shirt, and with the jet black pants that hugged his tight, pert ass, he appeared striking, confident and extremely desirable. Perhaps the most distinctive feature about the man was that the sight of him made Ken’s dick go rock hard.

With that thought, Ken realised his eyes had just met Mike’s.

They stared at one another across the room.

Ken didn’t know if it was still Donna Buckley on the microphone, or if someone equally unmemorable had taken centre stage. Not caring about the other poets in the vicinity, he basked in the smouldering attention of Mike Warner and held the challenge of the man’s mesmerising gaze.

Considering the lascivious lilt of the man’s smile, Ken suspected he was being mentally undressed. Basking in the cuteness of Mike’s smile, Ken decided it was not such an unpleasant process to endure.

The evening sauntered slowly past. Mike introduced half a dozen or so poets, always finding time to make a genial and gracious comment about the material that had been presented, even for those pieces that had struck Ken as dire or artless or badly presented.

Before his audience Mike was bold and confident and seemed invested in the moment. And, although his performance as host incorporated everyone, his gaze never shifted from Ken.
“That’s an end to the first part of our open mic session,” Mike eventually told the room. “We’ll be reconvening in about quarter of an hour. If anyone out there is wanting to buy me a drink tonight, I’m sampling real ales this evening.”

Ken could take a hint.

Whilst the audience smattered another round of approving applause in Mike’s direction, Ken went to the bar and ordered a second port for himself and one of the pub’s speciality real ales for Mike. The latter was served in a traditional dimpled glass tankard with a large, round handle. Ken held the drink as though he was transporting a valuable treasure and walked slowly to Mike’s table where he passed him the drink.

“If you think I’m the sort of easy lay who’s bought with a single pint, you’re not far wrong,” Mike grinned.

Ken laughed uncertainly and hoped the thrust of his erection wasn’t too obvious through his jeans. “I was hoping to ask for some advice.”

Mike raised an eyebrow and encouraged him to take a seat. “For advice, I might expect something more than a drink.”

Ken was going to ask what the cost would be but he could see the wicked twinkle of Mike’s gaze had now settled on his crotch and he suspected he already knew the answer to the question before it was asked. He also thought, if that was the price Mike would demand, it was one he would be happy to pay.
It was more than an hour later before Ken got to explain his needs.

Mike called the audience back and introduced a respected poet that Ken recognised from the local circuit. After a twenty minute set, a set that included some impressive words and a very respectable performance, Mike was calling for another break. Ken had expected he would be able to chat with him then but there were audience members who wanted to sign up for the slam in the third section of the event and there were others who wanted to talk to Mike about publishers, pamphlets and the minutiae of poetry.

Ken bought Mike a second pint of the pub’s real ale, served again in a dimpled glass tankard, and urged himself to relax and enjoy the atmosphere.

It should not have been difficult.

The pub was pleasant. The atmosphere was filled with the camaraderie of people who enjoy playing with words. And, even though he had no one to talk to, he had Mike to look at and that was something he could see would never grow old.

The only thing that stopped him from properly enjoying the spirit of the evening was the knowledge of what he needed to do. Each time his thoughts turned to the reason why he needed to talk with Mike Warner his hands grew clammy, his head throbbed with the prospect of an impending migraine and his heartbeat seemed to quicken with a rush of panicked adrenaline. It was as much
as he could manage to simply sip at his glass of port and not baulk at the rich, fruity taste of the drink.

The slam began.

It was heralded as the final session of the evening and Ken found, despite his anxieties, the pleasure of watching Mike’s performance on the microphone made the evening pass quickly and in an entertaining fashion. Mike was easy on the eye and his dynamic presence at the front of the stage was wholly entertaining. He had a way of making poets feel comfortable. He found ways to praise the distinctive and the unusual. Even though the competitive nature of the slam called on Mike to make snap judgements about the quality of one poet over another, he managed to make the decisions with a wit and panache that eased the upset for those who lost and didn’t pander too much to the egos of the winners.

Ken sipped slowly on the remnants of his port and watched the slam play out to a triumphant conclusion. The guest poet had participated but he was knocked out early in the second round. Ken was surprised to see Donna Buckley in the final pairing, although she lost out to a young woman dressed in a Hufflepuff top. Ken thought the winner appeared to have several friends on the slam’s judging panel, and then he quietly chided himself for imagining corruption in a poetry slam.

In truth, the background details of the evening barely registered on Ken’s consciousness. He was enjoying the evening for one reason and one reason only: he was able to spend his time watching Mike Warner.

“So, you’re after my advice?” Mike asked eventually.

The slam was over. The pub was quietening down to tables of hardened drinkers and a rash of remaining poets squeezing the last drops of conversation.
from their glasses. The microphone had been switched off and Mike had finally said goodnight to the last of his friends and followers from the audience. He sat alone at a table near the stage. Scribbling notes on a pad as they talked, he glanced briefly up and caught the attention of a waitress behind the bar. He made a couple of gestures and pointed at the table. She seemed to understand his sign language because she nodded eager agreement and started to pull a pint.

Ken eased himself into a seat opposite Mike and nodded agreement.

“Advice,” he repeated. “If you don’t mind.”

“How do you think I can help?”

Ken swallowed twice. He held Mike’s gaze before saying, “I want to read my poetry to an audience.”

Mike waited expectantly.

The waitress came and placed two drinks between them: a pint for Mike and a port for Ken. When Ken said nothing further about the advice he needed, Mike asked, “Is that it? You want to read your poetry to an audience? Why didn’t you sign up for the open mic or the slam?”

Ken shook his head. “I want guidance. Tuition.”

“No.” Mike glanced down at the notes he’d been scribbling. “No. I’m not a teacher.”

“Maybe you’re not a teacher,” Ken admitted. “But you’re very good at this. And you could show me how to best present my poetry to an audience, couldn’t you?”

Mike sipped thoughtfully from his pint. “What would I get from this?”

“What do you want?”
The smile on Mike’s lips told Ken that he was thinking of something bold, unconventional and very likely risqué. He could feel a blush colouring his own cheeks as his thoughts followed a similar lewd avenue. Whatever price Mike placed on his tuition services, Ken figured it would most likely be a price he was happy to pay.

“That have you brought any of your poetry with you?” Mike asked eventually. “It would be as well to see if your stuff is worth sharing with an audience before we go any further.”

Ken nodded and produced a thin, careworn notebook that was held closed with an ailing rubber band. “These are some of my favourites,” he admitted, lowering his gaze to the book as he tried to pass it to Mike. “I’ve not published a collection yet but I’m working on…”

“Read one to me,” Mike said.

Ken stared at him with wide-eyed shock. He glanced around the sparsely populated pub and lowered his voice to a whisper. “I can’t do that,” he breathed. “Someone might hear.”

Mike nodded and thoughtfully sipped at his pint. “If you’re going to read your poetry to an audience, there’s a danger that a lot of people might hear.”

“Yes.” Ken could feel the colour rising in his cheeks. “But I don’t want to try reading my work until I’ve had some practice. Some guidance. Some tuition.” He fixed Mike with a plaintive frown and hoped the man would understand what he was saying.

“Perhaps we need to start off with smaller steps?” Mike suggested.

Ken wanted to sigh with relief. He toyed with his glass of port and asked, “What sort of smaller steps were you thinking?”
“I think you should come back to my place this evening and maybe read me a poem whilst we’re alone.”

Even though these were the words he’d been hoping to hear, Ken could feel his heartbeat quicken at the suggestion.
Later, Ken thought things might have worked out differently if he hadn’t surrendered to the kiss. Mike had shown him into the apartment and offered a coffee. Ken had told him that the worst things in life often happened in the name of coffee, but Mike assured him it wasn’t a euphemism and Ken had accepted the drink wanting to sober up from the mild port-induced tipsy he was carrying. As Mike boiled the kettle in the apartment’s kitchen, Ken stood in a comfortable front room and fumbled with the notebook that contained his poems.

The book had been a gift from someone special. It was not a particularly expensive brand. But it had been important to Ken when it was given and the poems he’d written in the journal remained very important to him. His favourite poem, the one written on the first page of the notebook, was a haiku titled ‘Toys’. Ken’s gaze flitted over the familiar words. They had been scratched on the vellum in his own sloping handwriting, a script that looked stylish from a distance but, on closer inspection, always struck him as spidery and clumsily constructed. He tried to still the rising quell of anxiety that came when he thought of reading the poem to Mike.

_They are only toys_

_Lacking substance and purpose_

_Yet still, they are loved._
Hurriedly, he closed the book and placed it down on Mike’s coffee table. Trying to steady the churning swell of his stomach muscles, he glanced round the room and admired his host’s understated sense of style.

It was a pleasant room, decorated in neutral beiges and creams. The walls were adorned with framed abstracts that seemed to have been selected for something in their content rather than because the palate matched the décor. The room had no TV set but it did have a small bookshelf and Ken glanced at the titles displayed there. As well as a complete works of William Shakespeare he saw a copy of Sylvia Plath’s *Bell Jar* and Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. He had to resist the urge to put the books in alphabetical order and smiled at his own OCD habit of needing to have everything arranged in a specific fashion.

“That’s a very kissable smile,” Mike said, returning with two mugs of black coffee. He placed them on coasters on the coffee table beside Ken’s notebook. His gaze lingered on the bound volume before he glanced up and asked, “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that, in an alphabetical world, Sylvia Plath should sit on the other side of Edgar Allan Poe on your bookshelf,” Ken admitted. “And, if that makes you want to kiss my smile, don’t let me stop you.”

That was all it took.

Mike stepped close to him and placed his hands on either side of Ken’s face. His touch was warm. His fingers were obviously strong. Ken was so acutely aware of the moment he believed he could feel every ridge of Mike’s fingerprints as they caressed his skin and trailed over the bristles of his five o’clock shadow.

Holding Ken still, bringing his lips closer, Mike softly offered his mouth.
Ken leant into the kiss and the moment stretched. There was the soft and subtle caress of Mike’s lips brushing his. The kiss became more urgent as Mike’s tongue slipped into his mouth.

Ken could feel himself growing painfully hard.

He melted in the passion of Mike’s embrace and responded eagerly. He could feel himself being tasted and, considering the urgency of the exchange, he guessed Mike was just as excited by the moment as he felt himself. When their lips eventually broke apart Ken found himself grinning into the invitation of Mike’s smile.

“As much as I want to hear your poetry,” Mike began. His voice was husky. His words were carried by an uncharacteristic shortness of breath with which Ken could empathise. “As much as I want to hear your poetry,” Mike repeated. “There’s something more pressing that I’d like to try first.”

“Would that involve decamping to the bedroom?”

“That would be a good place to start.”

And then they were in the orderly pleasantness of Mike’s bedroom, undressing and kissing and urgently exploring and working hurriedly to get their bodies closer to each other. Without the inky shirt and the tight black pants, Mike’s body was revealed as being muscular and lean. Ken found himself kissing one pectoral, and then the other, celebrating the stiff thrust of the man’s nipples as they burst through the curls of his chest hairs.

His chest was scrubbed with a dusting of inky curls, not the same jet as the hair on his scalp but, Ken thought, this was a softer and more inviting charcoal.

A thickening forest trail of dark curls crept down across his flat stomach and formed a lush dark nest around his groin. Ken’s fingers strayed slowly downward
to the stiff, substantial length of Mike’s erection. It was a strain to encircle the shaft with one hand and he heard himself catch a breath as he realised how much substance he was holding.

The hardness felt good in his palm. It was a solid muscle of flesh that throbbed with warm, wanton vitality. As he stroked his hand back and forth along the length, Ken could feel his own arousal pulsing with the urgent need to be touched.

He silently prayed that Mike wouldn’t make him beg for that caress and he was relieved when he felt the man’s fingers making an exploration.

Mike’s hand wrapped around Ken’s bare flesh and his touch was a delicious example of perfect pressure that Ken did not want to end. Mike stroked and squeezed with a lazy confidence that was almost more than Ken could tolerate. He hadn’t realised his arousal was so intense and it took an effort of enormous self-control to hold back the climax that was already tightening his balls.

Ken closed his eyes, steeled himself, and tried not to get lost in the pleasure of Mike’s sultry, quickening kisses.

“Before we do anything else,” Mike muttered. He was close enough to be whispering the words into Ken’s ear. “I want you to answer me one question.”

“What do you want to know?”

“You have to answer honestly and openly,” Mike pressed.

Ken was on the verge of laughing. They were naked together and enveloped in a rush of urgent arousal. They were caressing each other’s erections. Ken was preparing to give his body to the man and he didn’t know how much more open he could be. “What do you want to know?” he repeated.

“Why is it so important to read your poetry to an audience?”
Ken pulled himself out of the embrace. He studied Mike suspiciously and wondered if it was possible that the man knew. There seemed to be no other explanation to justify him asking such a specific question. Ken could feel his arousal waning. Although he still longed to be in the room with Mike, and wanted to continue what they’d begun, his desire dwindled. Miserably he realised he had made a mistake. The whole evening had been a mistake.

“I’d best be going,” Ken said, snatching his discarded shirt from the floor.

Mike’s eyes widened in dismay. “No,” he said quickly. “Please don’t.”

Ken wasn’t listening. He punched his fists into the shirt sleeves. He pulled his jacket over the unfastened shirt and rushed out of Mike’s apartment. His cheeks were burning and his head pounded with the dull embarrassed thud of regret and humiliation. It was only as he was settling himself on the bus that would take him back home that he realised he’d left his notebook of poems on the coffee table in Mike’s apartment.
It was a minute past nine the following morning when Ken knocked on the door of Mike’s apartment. The sky was the unspoilt blue of a Wordsworth sonnet. The apartment door was a winter white uPVC. The air was silent save for the distant sigh of passing traffic.

Ken knew it was a Saturday. He also knew it was uncivilised to wake someone so early at the start of the weekend. But he needed to get his notebook back and that need had to be satisfied immediately. Every second that passed without having it in his hands felt strange and worrying, as though he was missing an important internal organ or a vital limb. He had spent the night tossing restlessly, trying not to think about how the evening should have ended, and trying to talk himself out of rushing round to Mike’s apartment earlier so he could retrieve the book as soon as dawn had broken.

It had not been a good night.

He had slept poorly.

He had woken each hour, remembering that the notebook of poems was no longer within easy reach. Each time that thought blundered across his mind it had made him want to get dressed, get a cab to Mike’s home, and find some way of getting into the house so he could get his book back. Knowing the book of poems was in someone else’s possession was enough to make his chest tighten with a panicked absence of breath.
He had given up trying to sleep at around five in the morning. Not that he felt he was missing much when he climbed out of the bed. The night seemed to have been spent awkwardly untangling himself from the duvet. Ken had staggered to the kitchen, made himself a mug of unappetising coffee and a couple of slices of scorched toast, and forced himself not to rush to Mike’s to retrieve the book. It had taken every atom of his self-restraint to wait until the civilised hour of a minute past nine before approaching the apartment.

But now that the time had arrived, now he could honestly say he had waited until after nine o’clock, so it wasn’t really that early, he knocked briskly on the door and waited with dwindling patience for a response.

Mike opened the door whilst yawning.

He covered his open mouth with the back of his hand. His hair was tousled as though he had been pulled from a heavy sleep. He looked deliciously attractive in a silky black kimono. The robe hugged his muscular physique and revealed a tantalising glimpse of the curls adorning his broad chest. In the morning light the curls looked a rich onyx that Ken longed to caress.

“Am I so irresistible that you had to come back?” Mike asked drily.

“I left my notebook here.”

Mike turned around and gestured for Ken to follow him into the apartment.

Ken hesitated, not sure it was sensible to accept such an invitation. Even in a state of just-out-of-bed disarray, Mike looked uncommonly attractive and obscenely desirable. It had taken most of Ken’s willpower to resist him the previous night. Now, knowing Mike was likely naked beneath the contour-hugging robe, Ken worried that his willpower would not be strong enough to offer any further resistance.
“I’m just doing myself a coffee,” Mike called. He had already walked inside the apartment, as though expecting Ken to follow like an obedient dog. “Would you care for a cup?”

Ken sighed and acquiesced.

Even though he knew it wasn’t a sensible idea, even though he knew the worst things in life usually happened in the name of coffee, he followed Mike inside.

The apartment was exactly as he remembered it from the previous evening. He was relieved to see that his notebook still sat on the coffee table where he had left it. He tried not to show his relief but it took an effort not to run to the book, snatch it into an embrace and then flee from Mike’s apartment with the prize safely clasped in his arms.

He studied the notebook for a long moment, trying to work out if it had been moved from the position where he’d left it. He couldn’t recall exactly how he had left the book, although he was sure he wouldn’t ordinarily have left it at such a rakish angle to the square edge of a coffee table.

_Had Mike opened the pages and read any of the contents?_

The question pounded inside his brow like the onset of a migraine. The thought that Mike might have been secretly reading his poetry was both unsettling and thrilling.

_Surely he wasn’t the sort of sneak to go nosing inside someone’s poetry book? But, if he had read any of the poetry, what had he thought to the quality and the sentiments he’d found in there?_
Mike returned from the kitchen brandishing two mugs of coffee. Once he had handed the drinks over he pulled a slim notebook from the pocket of his kimono and passed it to Ken. “This is yours, if you want it.”

Ken frowned. “What’s this?”

“It’s a Moleskine.”

Ken had seen that much. The quality of the notebook would have been obvious from a mile away. He shook his head, ready to make a polite refusal and explain that the gift was too generous.

“Please take it,” Mike insisted. “I can see you enjoy writing in a quality notebook.” He nodded toward the coffee table. “And I can see that the notebook you’ve got is almost full. I thought you might get some use from a new one.”

Ken examined the gift. It was a handy size, smoothly bound and obviously expensive. He knew that Moleskine was the brand of choice that had been used by Ernest Hemingway, Jean-Paul Sartre, Oscar Wilde and Pablo Picasso. Moleskine books were the sort of gift that were presented for the achievement of considerable anniversaries or those landmark birthdays that ended with a depressing zero. They weren’t the sort of things that were presented casually to unexpected guests on a Saturday morning alongside a cup of Douwe Egberts.

“I can’t accept this,” Ken said. “These cost a fortune, don’t they?”

Mike shrugged. “It was a gift from someone who is no longer in my life. I’m not going to use it and I don’t have the courage to drop it in the bin. It’s yours if you want it. If you don’t want it, you can drop it in the bin once you’ve left here. I won’t ask about it again. I promise.”

Ken smiled and said another thank you. The quality of the notebook was too good for him to even think about disposing of it. A doubt rushed through his
mind and he glanced apprehensively toward the coffee table. “Does that mean you were reading my poems last night, after I’d gone?”

Mike laughed and shook his head. “Hardly,” he grunted. There was a rueful glint in his eye that said, after Ken had, he had been forced to take care of more practical urges than the desire to read a poetry book.

“Last night, when you were on the verge of reading a poem to me, you opened your notebook three pages from the end of the book. From an observation like that, it doesn’t take Miss Marple work out that the book is almost full.”

Ken nodded acceptance of this. He sipped his coffee and tried to decide whether he should be disappointed or relieved that his work hadn’t been read. The poetry he’d written contained some of his most intimate thoughts but he didn’t suppose he would have minded if Mike had read some of those pieces. In truth, he didn’t suppose he could object to the sharing of any intimacy with Mike.

“Is it still a big secret as to why you want to perform you poetry so badly?”

Ken thought about this for a moment and then shrugged. The room was set up with a pair of settees facing each other across the coffee table. Ken settled himself on the one closest to his notebook and was only slightly relieved when Mike chose to sit opposite him rather than next to him. Admittedly, if Mike had been sitting next to him that would have suggested he still wanted to try and rekindle the familiarity they had been about to enjoy the previous evening. But, because he was sitting opposite, Ken was disturbed to realise he could see the obvious muscular strength of Mike’s powerful bare legs. He could also see that the man wasn’t used to sitting discreetly in a kimono because the hem had shifted up to reveal a tantalising glimpse of his upper thigh and shadows that clearly concealed more.
Ken glanced at the coffee table and placed his new Moleskine by the side of his battered old notebook. He took a deep breath and tried to think how best to explain the situation.

“Did you know that the wedding of the century is happening next weekend?”

Mike frowned for a moment before understanding rushed across his features. “The Roy and Ray wedding?”

Ken nodded.

Preparations for the marriage had been dominating conversation throughout the city for the past six months. It had been reported in news stories. It had been discussed in every club and bar. Considering the celebrity status of half of the couple, Roy Talbot was a world renowned golf player, an occasional TV presenter and the embodiment of the term ‘local legend’, Ken would have been amazed if Mike had not known about the event.

“The wedding of the century,” Mike said. His smile was momentarily tight, as though he was pinning it in place for fear of it falling and revealing another emotion. “How do you know the happy couple?”

Ken swallowed. “I’m a close friend of Roy’s.”

“How close?”

Ken hesitated for a moment and then figured there was no sense in keeping the information secret. “Very close,” he admitted. “So close that, twelve months ago, next weekend’s event was going to be called the Roy and Ken wedding.”

Mike winced. His eyes softened with compassion. He sipped at his coffee and Ken took the opportunity to taste his own drink. The silence was companionable and, even though he didn’t like talking about the Roy and Ray
wedding this was the first time he’d been able to mention the forthcoming event without succumbing to the threat of tears.

“Does it still hurt?” Mike asked.

“I want closure,” Ken told him. He knew he wasn’t answering the question. He figured there was no need to answer the question. “I want closure, and luckily for me, Roy’s asked if I’ll read a poem at the wedding reception.”

“Wow,” Mike breathed. He chuckled to himself, a sound that rattled musically from his big broad chest. “I hope you told Roy to go and fuck himself.”

“No,” Ken said. “I’ve written the poem on the last page of that notebook.” He nodded toward the corner of the coffee table. “I’ve written the poem. I’ve also found two classic poems that I think would be appropriate,” he studied Mike carefully and said, “Now I’m trying to find someone who can give me guidance on how to read those pieces at the wedding.”

He wanted to say more but he had managed this much without being overcome by emotion and he knew that it would only take a couple of additional words to make the tears flow.

Mike came and sat beside him. He placed an arm around Ken’s shoulder and that was when Ken began to cry. Mike stroked the first of the tears away with a big, strong thumb. Then he had found a tissue in one of the kimono’s useful pockets and he was wiping Ken’s eyes dry.

As he whispered soft, soothing sentiments, Ken realised he was being held by an impressive, handsome and considerate man who felt incredibly good in his arms. He tried to remember why he had fled from Mike’s company the previous evening but the reasons that came to his mind now made no sense. Had he really been unwilling to tell Mike about his need to read a poem at Roy and Ray’s
wedding? Sharing that information now seemed like the most natural thing he could have done.

Mike’s lips shaped words of heartfelt assurance. As Ken studied the lips, lips that were so close they were within kissing distance, it seemed right to tilt his head and move his face closer. Mike considered him quietly for an instant before nodding agreement. Then he was pushing his face forward and Ken was reminded that the man was a formidable kisser.

The kiss was a delicious surrender.

Mike’s lips brushed accidentally against his at first. Then, after a moment’s hesitancy, the kiss became bolder. Ken pressed himself into the exchange and he could feel his upset being banished by the rush of arousal that came from being in Mike’s embrace.

He wasn’t sure how they moved, or which of them instigated the action, but a moment later he found himself again in Mike’s bedroom. The rumpled sheets were beneath him and they were both in a state of undress.

Ken’s jeans and shirt had fallen to the floor.

Mike, as Ken had suspected, had been gloriously naked beneath the silky black kimono. His body, hard, muscular and a pleasure to explore, was warm beneath the caress of Ken’s cool hands. His chest was broad and his nipples, shrouded beneath dark curls, stood as a hard temptation that demanded that Ken suckle against them. His biceps were rounded and muscular and his entire body looked as though it had been honed to advertise the benefits of gym membership. Or as though it had been honed just for Ken’s satisfaction.
Caressing the man eagerly, Ken allowed his hands to slide downwards to more important areas. The length of Mike’s erection, a substantial girth of heated flesh, pulsed softly in Ken’s palm.

Their kiss continued to linger. Mike stroked eddies of urgent excitement in Ken’s breast whilst Ken found his palm sliding up and down the man’s hardness. As he moved kisses down the man’s body, pressing his lips against Mike’s throat, his chest, and then his stomach, he was surprised to feel the strong hands take his shoulders. He had been on the verge of placing his mouth over the swollen end of Mike’s shaft when he was abruptly and firmly stopped.

“No,” said Mike. “You’re not doing that. Not yet.”
“No?” Ken asked doubtfully. “Why not?”

He didn’t want to force Mike to do anything against his will. But in that moment he could think of nothing he wanted more than to take the man’s erection in his mouth and suck. The desire was so strong he could feel himself salivating with the need.

“I want you to do something else first,” Mike explained.

Ken arched an eyebrow.

“I want you to do something that’s not sexual,” Mike said coolly. He stood up and led Ken out of the bedroom. He walked confidently without clothes. His erection, still solid, wavered ahead of him like a divining rod.

Ken followed, not quite so sure he had the same athletic build or the same self-assured confidence. He was very conscious of his bare feet on the sumptuous carpet of Mike’s apartment. He was also aware that his own body was slightly smaller than Mike’s in almost every important aspect.

“Come on,” Mike called. “Get your sexy little ass in here before I change my mind and decide I’d rather just use you for your body rather than exploiting your mind as well.”

Ken grinned. He hadn’t realised that anyone ever considered him having a body or a mind that was worth using or exploiting. The idea that Mike had seen so much inside him suggested the budding relationship had the potential to be more
than the mere satisfaction of a libidinous urge. He threw his shoulders back and marched more confidently into the front room.

Mike pushed the Moleskine towards him.

“Write a new poem,” he said. “It doesn’t matter what it’s about. But, before we do anything else, I want you to write a new poem and be prepared to read it out tonight.”

Ken could feel his hands growing clammy with unexpected nerves. He tapped his naked thighs and bared breast with the palms of his hands, as though exploring invisible pockets. “I haven’t got a pen on me.”

Mike reached toward a shelf and retrieved a Sheaffer fountain pen.

“Borrow mine.”

Ken thanked him with a weak smile and accepted the Moleskine. He sat down and studied the blank page of the open book as he tried to come up with an idea. His thoughts were caught between considering the blank page, trying to find a way of using that as a metaphor for the way he was starting to feel about Mike, when the idea blossomed as a partially-formed poem.

A quiet smile of satisfaction crossed his lips and he nodded.

“OK,” he said. He began to scratch on the page with the tip of the pen, and then stopped himself. He glanced up at Mike and said, “But, if I’m writing a poem for tonight, I’ll expect you to write something too.”

A look of doubt brushed across Mike’s features before he nodded agreement.

“Sure,” he said. “I can give that a try.”

He might have said more but Ken had stopped listening as he focused on writing the poem that explained his thoughts comparing Mike to a blank page. It
took him an hour to finish the piece, and he knew it would take him a further hour to trim and craft the material so that he was pleased with the finished piece of work. But, as his English teacher had always told him, poems were never written: they were only ever rewritten.

Mike provided Ken with coffee whilst he wrote.

At some point he slipped back into the kimono. And, at some point later in the morning he appeared showered and wearing jeans and a snug-fitting Henley. The stark white of the top brought out the shine in his eyes and the brilliance of his smile.

When the first draft of the poem was finished Mike took Ken to a local café and ordered a light lunch for the pair of them. It was not a glamorous location but it was clean and pleasant and the food was tasty. Tapping on the cover of the Moleskine, Mike asked, “Are you going to read that tonight?”

Ken’s stomach tightened as he remembered that he was now expected to present the material to an audience. A nervous voice at the back of his thoughts wanted to shriek a refusal and find a way to firmly excuse himself from reading the poem. He considered a handful of potential excuses and then realised he was only delaying the inevitable. He also realised, given that the Roy and Ray wedding was now so close, he needed to do something quickly or he would not have the experience to be able to perform his work to an audience. If he didn’t make a start on practising his readings, he would never get to a stage where he could properly deliver his material to the wedding party.

“OK,” he agreed. The words felt unexpectedly heavy. He tapped the closed cover of the Moleskine and said, “I’ll read this tonight.” He frowned and added, “Will you be reading yours?”
“Sure,” Mike said airily. He held out a hand and asked, “Am I OK to read what you’ve written?”

Ken offered the poem and then, when Mike was about to take the book, he snatched it back. He grinned at the look of surprise and disappointment on Mike’s face and said, “You’re not getting it that easily. You interrupted a rather promising moment this morning to make me write this poem. What can I expect now in return for letting you read it?”

“Are you suggesting an exchange of favours?” Mike arched an eyebrow.

“I suppose you could call it that.”

Mike leant close. He placed a hand on Ken’s thigh and his fingers slid slowly upwards. Ken held his breath as he savoured the sensation of fingertips slipping closer and closer toward his straining bulge. When Mike’s fingers stroked the pattern of the zipper at the front of his jeans, he tried not to tremble with relief.

“Should we be doing this here?” Ken asked.

“Probably not,” Mike conceded. “You’re very tempting. But the full English is too good for me to risk getting permanently barred for demonstrations of lewd behaviour in one of the booths.”

Ken chuckled at that and pulled himself away.

Mike grabbed his wrist and held him for an instant. “Perhaps we could continue this back at my place?”

Ken nodded agreement. He was already anxious about the idea of reading his work in front of an audience in the evening and he figured spending time with Mike would give him something to think about other than his nervousness.

“Have you had a chance to write your poem yet?” Ken asked.

Mike shrugged. “I’ll do that later.”
“But, you will do it?” Ken insisted.

Mike nodded. “First, more important than me writing a poem, I need to get you back to my flat.” In response to the question in Ken’s eye he added, “If I’m going to be inspired to write a poem, I need something to inspire me first, and I think there’s something we could do together that might prove perfectly inspirational.”
The sex was good and satisfying and everything Ken had hoped it would be.

Because they had already undressed each other twice there was no longer any hesitation or embarrassment associated with removing their clothes. They were still chatting about the pleasantness of the cafeteria as they undressed in Mike’s bedroom and the conversation seemed dull and pedestrian rather than something that was about to precede a bout of passionate lovemaking. It was only when they were both naked that the atmosphere seemed to shift. The air turned electric and they were both overcome by a hard and insatiable urge.

Climbing onto the bed from opposite sides they met in the middle and Ken allowed Mike to take control. He didn’t mind the way the man held him too firmly or guided his naked body to meet his own. It was a pleasure to be able to explore Mike’s sculpted frame using his fingertips and his lips and getting to know every inch of the man. Mike’s chest still retained the fragrance of the shower gel he’d used that morning, a blend of honey and oranges that was a sweet accoutrement to the scent of the man’s natural musk.

Not that Mike was a passive partner in the bedroom who simply lay there and allowed himself to be sniffed. He teased Ken’s erection to a state of urgent hardness and then managed to imbue further excitement simply with a kiss, a caress or a subtle whisper. He hadn’t shaved that morning and the scratch of his
bristles were a delightful contrast to the soft brush of his lips. It was a sensation that Ken savoured as he felt it against his cheek, his mouth and his throat. It was even more exciting when he realised that the contrast of pleasure, and the light prickle of discomfort, was exciting the flesh of his chest, and then his stomach, and then his groin.

Mike had one hand around the base of Ken’s shaft and his tongue lapped lightly against the swollen end. Ken groaned happily and willed himself not to be too won over by the pleasure. The delight that came from having Mike’s hand slip slowly up and down his length, whilst the man’s mouth worked gently on the tip of his erection, was almost more than he could contain.

Rather than simply letting the satisfaction rush through him, Ken positioned himself on the bed so that he could give Mike the same sensation that he was receiving. His fingers snaked through the thick, dark curls of Mike’s pubes. He gently kneaded the man’s tight balls, grinning when he heard Mike’s sigh of urgent approval. The cock in his hand throbbed as though the pleasure was proving too intense. Ken could feel a thrill of satisfaction as he realised that Mike was getting the same level of relief from this moment that he too was enjoying.

The pleasure lasted for an all-too-brief eternity.

When Ken squeezed the climax from Mike it felt as though the man’s length was going to pulse and pulse for hour after hour. The salty explosion of his hot seed seemed to flow in an endless, urgent rush.

Similarly, when Mike sucked the orgasm from Ken’s shaft, the satisfaction came too soon and lasted for ever. The pleasure was so strong Ken groaned as the muscles at the base of his shaft throbbed and stiffened and forced his release.
And, even afterwards, as he was kissing the salty flavour of his own climax from Mike’s smile, the pleasure didn’t seem to subside.

They showered together and, surprised by the way events had transpired, Ken tried to work out where the day had gone. He recalled showing up at Mike’s at the start of the morning. They had gone to a café and spent time in bed but he couldn’t work out how that accounted for an entire day. It struck him that time in Mike’s company flew past so quickly it seemed like barely a few minutes had expired since he had arrived at the apartment shortly after nine o’clock that morning. The rest of the day hurtled past until the evening was upon them and Ken was walking hand-in-hand with Mike to the pub venue where he would read his poem.

After settling himself in a discreet corner of the pub, a corner that was sufficiently distant from Mike’s seat by the stage, Ken allowed the anxiety to consume him.

Nervous butterflies flapped and fluttered in his stomach.

He shrank from the idea of standing up and sharing his words with an audience. He knew he was being ridiculous to entertain the idea that anyone would be interested in his poetry. Worse, now that he had found someone as incredible as Mike, a man who knew about quality poetry and understood the importance of language, Ken was going to make a fool of himself by demonstrating an absence of talent, intelligence and ability.

He took out the Moleskine from his jacket pocket and fingered the patina of the leather-binding. The sensation calmed his thoughts. He told himself his nerves were not worth heeding and the experience would not be as interminable as he
feared. He kept repeating that thought and praying it would prove true as the start of the event crept closer.

At only a little after seven thirty Mike stood up.

By way of welcoming everyone to the room, he began to recite a poem. His voice, carried by the microphone and echoing sonorously from the brick walls of the building, was rich, magnificent and commanding.

“From childhood's hour I have not been / As others were, I have not seen…”

Ken frowned, trying to decide if this was something original or if Mike was repeating a classic. The words had a haunting beauty that seemed familiar, yet he felt the sentiment behind them was expressing something from deep within Mike's heart.

“…as others saw, I could not bring / My passions from a common spring. From the same source I have not taken / My sorrow…”

It was Poe, Ken realised. He smiled tightly to himself when he recognised the poet. This was the same poet that Mike had relied on the previous evening.

“I could not awaken / My heart to joy at the same tone / And all I lov'd, I lov'd alone.”

The title was ‘Alone’, Ken recalled. It was a memorable piece of Poe's work. It had horror, romance and sadness in a few short lines. Ken wondered if Mike was of the habit of always reciting Poe at open mic events or if this reading of ‘Alone’, and the previous evening's rendition of ‘A Dream within a Dream’ just happened to be a coincidence. If Mike had a man-crush on Poe, Ken was fine with that. But he wondered why the man was reciting work from a long dead poet rather than creating and performing his own work.

It was a question that he knew he would not ask.
Mike finished the poem and received a flourish of applause from the audience. He told everyone gathered that he was collecting names for the open mic session, and he then went to the bar to get drinks for himself and Ken.

For Ken, the prospect of the evening stretched out like a menacing threat. He promised to treat himself to a white port when he had finished reading, and he refused to touch a drop of alcohol before. Mike conceded this would be a good idea and told Ken that, when he was doing his reading, he would make notes if he could think of anything that was going to improve the performance.

They kissed briefly and it was a beautiful distraction. It was a tantalising moment of intimacy that allowed Ken to forget that he was on the verge of standing before a public audience and sharing his innermost thoughts.

Then Mike was returning to his solitary seat at the side of the stage and Ken was left alone to brood on the worry that he would stammer through the production of his poem and leave everyone convinced that he was not a poet and had no place at an open mic event.

His stomach burbled.

Deliberately, he glanced around the room trying to find something to stop himself from brooding on the impending doom of the moment. He recognised Donna Buckley at a nearby table. She sat with an androgynous partner who considered Donna with sullen eyes. When Donna later stood up to read, and then slunk back to her seat beneath the ripple of terse applause, Ken said a silent prayer that he would be able to give a better performance than Donna had managed.

She had no presence on the microphone.
Her voice was dull and flat and, even though he could understand that her words were intelligent and insightful, he thought her banal delivery made it difficult to enjoy the material she was sharing. When she’d finished, there was no definite conclusion to her work. She read the last line and then slipped from the stage as though she didn’t want to waste time listening to applause or bothering to smile at her audience.

It was a shame, Ken thought, because the words she was saying struck him as being profound and well worth considering. Her poem this evening had been a piece that discussed the solitude of a relationship: one couple made of two separate individuals, each hoping the other wanted the same thing. He couldn’t recall the exact words, but he knew that a more memorable performance would have allowed him the privilege of better understanding her thoughts.

It was whilst he was brooding on Donna Buckley’s poor reading that Ken realised his fingers had been pressing into the cover of the Moleskine. He stopped himself from making this a nervous habit, unwilling to damage such a prestigious notebook for a reason as frivolous as nervousness. Placing the book into his jacket pocket he focused on listening to each performer and trying to enjoy their performance. There was a comic reader, an earnest amateur who had a lot of enthusiasm but little more stage presence than Donna. He was followed by a vulgarian who thought it was whimsical to describe unpleasant sexual acts in reductive terms.

As each poet stood up and then returned to their seat, Ken knew the time was getting closer for him to read his work. He steeled himself for the ordeal, removed the Moleskine from his jacket pocket, and anxiously read the words over and over again until they stopped making sense.
Mike nodded at him when the rude poet had finished.

Ken swallowed and knew it was his turn.

He waited until Mike had made an introduction, although his pulse was hammering so hard in his temples that he didn’t hear a single word of what was being said. When Mike nodded again, and a spattering of polite applause began to ripple around the room, Ken stepped toward the microphone.

His hands were shaking as he opened the Moleskine.

The page trembled so much he thought it was fortunate he had memorised the words because they were wobbling too vigorously for him to read them from the notebook. Taking a deep breath, forcing himself not panic, Ken glanced around the room and tried to tell himself that the audience would be encouraging and supportive.

“This is called ‘Acts of Bravery’,” he explained.

Only half his words made it to the audience. Mike made a gesture, urging Ken to stand closer to the microphone. Ken thanked him, bumped his notebook into the microphone stand, and then winced as a whine of feedback screamed around the room.

“Cool,” laughed Mike. “That’s woken up the bastards at the back.”

The audience laughed. Ken’s cheeks burnt crimson.

His palms were sweating.

The chuckle of approval that had greeted Mike’s comment subsided and Ken could hear it falter to the sound of an expectant silence.

“Acts of Bravery,” he repeated. He stopped himself from further fumbling with the Moleskine and took another deep breath. “The crisp, white blank page.” The words came out hesitant at first, but then with growing confidence. The room
was silent and he sensed something in that absence of sound that he hoped was appreciative anticipation. Ken didn’t dare look at the faces staring back at him but he forced himself to pause long enough to let the audience know that he had reached the end of the first line. “There are few things more daunting,” he read, “than that first bold step…”

He paused again.

The poem was shifting to a second stanza.

“Just as with kissing. / Kissing and writing are true…”

He allowed his voice to trail off before delivering the final line, a repetition of the poem’s title: “Acts of bravery.”

He closed the Moleskine and took a step back away from the microphone.

It was only a short poem. In truth it was little more than two haiku jammed together as brief stanzas in a very brief piece of work. But the poem was enough for him to get a taste of reading his work to an audience. More importantly, the poem said something that he considered worthy of inclusion in a poem. It discussed kissing and writing and it made the point that they were both enormous acts of bravery.

The audience hesitated for an instant. It was only when they began to applaud that Ken realised he had been worried they might not like his words. Now, hearing the ripple of approval, he began to wonder if his poetry and his reading might meet with an equally positive response at Roy and Ray’s wedding.

The rest of the evening sped past in a blur.

In the first intermission Mike told Ken that the poem was clever and worked effectively. He suggested a couple of tips for helping with voice projection, delivering from the diaphragm and making eye contact wherever possible, but he
insisted they were only small suggestions for improvement and Ken already seemed to be doing the majority of things correctly.

Donna Buckley approached Ken and said she thought he’d delivered the poem with panache. She said his words had an artfully meta context. Ken didn’t know if he understood what she meant, but he thanked her and asked her about her own writing. She invited him to join her at the table she was sharing with her partner and, through the rest of the evening, he found himself discussing poetics with her as she explained her own beliefs in the importance of honesty in poetry. By the end of the second session Ken felt guilty for every disparaging thought he’d ever harboured about Donna’s abilities as a performance poet.

When the evening was eventually over, Ken went back to Mike’s apartment. He intended to have another glass of port and share all the other delicious diversions that he knew he would find waiting there.

Mike surprised him.

The intimacy they had first shared had seemed spontaneous. In the afternoon their passion had been consuming but considered. This evening it was urgent and fuelled by a deep and passionate longing.

Ken was still drinking his glass of port in the apartment’s lounge of port when Mike dropped to his knees and began to suck on his cock. The act was so unexpected and so pleasurable that Ken allowed himself to be won over by the moment. He basked in the silky sensations of Mike’s tongue sliding up and down his shaft. He stroked thoughtful caresses on the back of the man’s neck. He wouldn’t allow the climax to be sucked from his shaft but he was happy to let Mike work on his length and take him close to the explosion that his body now craved.

“You’re doing that too well,” Ken groaned.
He spat the words from between gritted teeth. His balls were tight with the need to ejaculate and he knew, unless he pulled himself away soon, he was going to shoot his load at the back of Mike’s throat.

“I’m glad the years of practice have come in useful,” Mike laughed.

“Is that the only thing you practised?”

Mike moved his face away from Ken’s erection and shook his head.

“There’s something I do even better than this. Do you want to try it?”

Ken had no idea what Mike was proposing but, in that moment, he didn’t mind. He nodded eagerly and again had to steel himself against coming when Mike took him an embrace. They shed the remainder of their clothes with practised ease, exchanging kisses and caresses as the trousers and shirts tumbled to the floor. Mike’s length was incredibly stiff but it was only when he rolled a condom over the tip, and then began to slide lube up and down the sheathed shaft that Ken understood what they were going to do.

His balls tightened with heady anticipation.

They didn’t bother leaving the lounge.

Ken knelt on the floor as Mike pushed between his thighs where he nestled the head of his length against Ken’s anus. Mike teased Ken lightly with a wetted finger, and then slipped a smear of lube against the resistance of his tight muscle. Eventually, with one hand holding Ken’s hip and the other guiding his length inside, Mike thrust himself forward.

The sensation was almost more than Ken could handle.

The pleasure was enormous and sudden and everything he had hoped it would be. As Mike pushed deeper Ken could feel the threat of the climax building
in his loins. He made a gargantuan effort to stave the pleasure but it was more than he could resist.

He chugged breath, savouring the sensation of being stretched by a man he found so exciting and desirable. He arched his back and basked in the thrill of Mike’s hands tightening on his hips.

“Was I right?” Mike asked. He spoke as he slid himself back and forth inside Ken. “Do you think I’ve practised this enough to call myself a master of the act?”

Ken could only groan in approval as the pleasure rushed through him. His back stiffened, his cock exploded, and in the same instant he felt the pulse of Mike’s sheathed climax erupting inside him.

They collapsed together in each other’s embrace.

Ken realised he had given himself to Mike with a passion and an abandon that he hadn’t dared to entertain with any man since he had discovered that Roy was seeing Ray. It was a powerful and personal intimacy but, in Mike’s arms, that passion felt absolutely right.

It was only afterwards, when they had retired to the bedroom and as he was falling to sleep in Mike’s arms, that Ken realised Mike hadn’t read an original poem at the event.

The thought was enough to make him sit up and wonder if he was reading too much into the relationship. As the doubts crept through his thoughts, crystalizing into reservations, Ken climbed softly out of the bed, dressed and then went home.
It was the longest week Ken could ever recall enduring.

He stayed at home and revised his poetry. Occasionally he would stand in front of the full-length mirror that hung on the inside of his wardrobe and recite the words aloud. It wasn’t the same as saying them in front of another person, and it was certainly no comparison to the benefits of performing his poetry in front of the critical eye of someone blessed with Mike’s knowledge and his shrewd observations. But, the more Ken thought about Mike, the more he thought it was better if he pushed the man from his mind.

Mike hadn’t written a poem and Ken suspected he knew why.

The thought brought him close to bitter tears of disappointment.

His own writing was fuelled by all the things that were happening in his world. He wrote about the things that he had observed. He wrote about the things that were important to him. He even wrote about the nervousness of writing and reading for an audience. In short, he wrote about those things he loved.

If Mike had the same approach to his writing then, Ken reasoned, Mike was clearly experiencing no emotional engagement with the connection Ken thought they had made.

Admittedly, Ken conceded, not everyone wrote from the same viewpoint. Ken was aware that some writers didn’t have that emotional engagement with their writing and, just because Mike hadn’t produced a poem that didn’t mean he had no
feelings. But it struck Ken as peculiar that the man hadn’t been able to write anything. And it seemed even more telling that Mike hadn’t even made a reference to the missing poem he had promised.

The reality seemed obvious to Ken.

Mike hadn’t been able to write about the passion of their shared intimacy. Mike hadn’t written about their blossoming friendship. Mike hadn’t even been able to write a quick limerick about the pleasure of the blowjobs they had given each other. The reason Mike hadn’t been able to write about these things, Ken decided, was because they meant nothing to him.

It hurt to think that the man did not reciprocate his passion. But Ken could think of no other explanation for the man’s inability to produce a single verse for the previous evening’s open mic event.

Each time he felt the familiar sting of rejection clouding his thoughts, and threatening to make his eyes dewy with the promise of tears, Ken went up to the bedroom mirror and practised the poem again.

He spent a lot of the week standing in front of the mirror.

By the eve of the Roy and Ray wedding, he knew all three poems by heart. Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 116’, Elizabeth Barret-Browning’s ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese 43’, and his own humble piece of poetry: a triolet toasting love. It was his intention to recite all three poems at the wedding reception, concluding with the triolet, so that the guests could raise their glasses at the conclusion of the poem. He was in the process of practising it for the thousandth time when his doorbell rang.

Mike stood on the step. He looked tired.

“Where have you been all week?” he asked.
Ken shrugged. He couldn’t think of an appropriate lie.

“You sneaked out last Saturday evening and you haven’t been in touch since. Is something wrong? Did I do something to upset you?”

Ken shook his head. “Come inside,” he said. “I’ll do you a coffee.”

Mike regarded him suspiciously. “The worst things in life usually happen in the name of coffee,” he remembered.

Ken couldn’t find the words to argue that point. With his shoulders slumped he encouraged Mike to step into the house and then left him alone in the TV room whilst he made drinks. When he returned from the kitchen, armed with two mugs of coffee, Ken found Mike studying a well-thumbed copy of *Don Juan*.

“Perhaps you could use this line for the wedding ceremony?” Mike suggested. He was chuckling affably as he read from the text. “Marriage from love, like vinegar from wine / A sad, sour, sober beverage, by time / Is sharpened from its high celestial flavour / Down to a very homely household savour.”

His grin faltered when he realised Ken was not smiling with him. Quietly, Mike replaced the book on the shelf and accepted his mug of coffee with a muffled thank you. “I thought you’d have called round so we could practice your poem for the wedding.”

Ken flexed a thin, watery smile that he knew wasn’t in his eyes. “I should have done,” he admitted. “But I didn’t want to trouble you. I know you’re busy and my needs didn’t seem that important.”

Mike frowned but seemed ready to let the remark slide past. He sipped absently at his coffee and Ken could understand his discomfort. Before, when they’d been together, there had been an obvious connection. Now it seemed that connection was either broken or seriously compromised. The air between them,
instead of being charged with the crackle of electric excitement, seemed dull and lacklustre.

“Do you want to read the poems now?” Mike asked.

Ken could think of no way to politely decline. He read each poem twice, each time following Mike’s guidance on how best to stand, where to breathe and when to effect a dramatic pause. After the second reading of the triolet Mike shook his head.

“I’m not feeling it,” Mike admitted. “Is there something on your mind?”

Ken was going to shake his head and pretend that nothing was troubling him when he realised that wasn’t going to help anyone. Taking a deep breath, meeting Mike’s gaze he said quietly, “You didn’t write a poem last week.”

Mike pursed his lips. “No,” he admitted. “I didn’t.”

Ken glared at him. “I’d ask why but I’m worried that I already know the answer.”

Mike looked momentarily puzzled. “You do?”

Ken nodded. “You didn’t write a poem because you’re not feeling anything for anyone right now. Is that right?”

Mike stared at him with obvious confusion. When understanding flashed across his features he briefly laughed and then shook his head. “My God. No. That’s not why I didn’t write anything. That couldn’t be further from the truth. I didn’t write a poem because I’ve got writer’s block.”

Ken considered this explanation doubtfully. As excuses went it appeared a little too convenient. Anyone could claim writer’s block.

Mike stood up and walked across to him.
Taking Ken’s face in his hands he placed a gently kiss on his lips and asked, “That’s not what you’ve been thinking for this last week, is it? You’ve not been thinking that I haven’t written anything because I’ve got no feelings for…”

His voice trailed off and a pained expression touched his face.

“Honestly,” he insisted. “I have writer’s block.”

“Writer’s block?” Ken agreed, nodding. He wasn’t sure he believed the explanation but he couldn’t think of a way to politely call bullshit. Trying to feign interest he asked, “How long have you had writer’s block?”

“About six months,” Mike admitted. “Right since the time my partner Ray decided to leave me and get engaged to a guy called Roy.”

Ken studied him for a moment without speaking. He wasn’t sure there was a lot he could say to that statement. When he did speak he heard himself saying nothing more original than a reiteration of Mike’s words.

“Your partner Ray left you to get engaged to a guy called Roy?”

“It’s a small world,” Mike said bitterly. “And that was a sufficiently devastating blow to leave me blocked.”

This time, when they kissed, the passion had returned. There was none of the hesitancy or doubt in the exchange and Ken realised they were on the verge of creating something special. The thrust of his own arousal pressed urgently toward Mike. He could feel the hardness of the man’s erection as their embrace brought them closer. He could hear the breathless pant of Mike’s arousal and new the man’s eagerness mirrored his own.

Consequently, it came as a surprise when Mike pulled away from him. Ken studied him doubtfully, wondering if he’d done something to cause the man to stop.
Mike grinned at him. “Read your poems again,” he insisted.

Ken did, although this time he started with Elizabeth Barret-Browning. “How do I love thee?” he asked. “Let me count the ways.”

Mike nodded encouragement.

As Ken stared into the man’s smile, the recital became easier and more professional than any he had previously given. Ken felt confident in his presentation of the material and, whilst he wasn’t sure if he would still feel so confident when he was standing before an ex-lover and a group of wedding guests, he figured there were other considerations to take into account.

“You look like you’re ready for tomorrow’s big event,” Mike told him.

“Not quite,” Ken admitted. “There are two other things I need.”

Mike arched an eyebrow.

“I need you to be my plus one.”

There was only a brief hesitation before Mike nodded. His smile was wide and generous. Ken wondered if Mike had been going through the same levels of upset he’d been enduring through the week and he cursed himself for allowing his doubts to cause them both so much distress.

“OK,” Mike agreed. “I’ll be your plus one. What’s the other thing you need?”

Ken swallowed and wondered if it was too much to ask. He steeled himself for a refusal before saying, “I want you to write me a poem for after the wedding.”

Mike’s eyes opened wide with surprise.

He shook his head. “Are you kidding?”

Ken handed Mike the Moleskine. “Write it on the back page of that book. Write something new and original. It doesn’t have to be long. It can be a haiku if
that’s all you feel in the mood for writing. But I’d like to see an original poem from you, if you’re able to write one.”

Mike looked like he was about to relent, then he pushed the Moleskine back into Ken’s hands. “I can’t. This is your notebook. This was a gift I gave to you.”

Ken grinned. “I know where the notebook came from. And I know you’ll give it back once you’ve written something.”

Mike nodded. Reluctantly, he took the notebook. “Very well,” he said. “I’ll try.” He paused and added, “But, before I write anything, I think you should provide me with some inspiration.”

Ken gave him a puzzled frown. The expression disappeared when Mike took him in his arms and gave him a kiss.

And the passionate interlude that followed proved to be surprisingly inspiring.
Ken drew a deep breath for the delivery of the sonnet’s final couplet. There was a hushed silence throughout the hotel. Every guest was listening intently, as though they each needed to know how this poem concluded. Roy and Ray, sitting hand-in-hand at the head table whilst smiling tightly at each other, were clearly impressed with the words. The other guests, guests who would later be kicking up their heels in response to ‘Single Ladies’ and ‘Marry You’, all seemed enraptured by the poetry.

Ken wouldn’t let himself think about any of the distractions around him.

The periphery of his vision was nothing more than a landscape of fuzzy whites and sparkly golds and gleaming silvers and that was as much as he wanted to focus on for Roy and Ray’s wedding. Being honest with himself, he didn’t want to think about anything other than the poetry.

“If this be error and upon me proved,” he recited quietly. “I never writ, nor no man ever loved.”

There was a moment’s silence as the guests considered the weight of the words. Then there was a rush of rapturous applause. If he’d been cynical, Ken might have thought the applause was started by Mike. But he knew that wasn’t the case. And, even if that was the case, although the words were being dedicated to Roy and Ray, Ken had read the words to Mike so he figured it would be appropriate for him to applaud.
“Beautiful,” Roy said, wiping a tear from his eye.

“Absolutely beautiful,” Ray agreed.

“I have a final poem of my own,” Ken told the room.

The guests fell silent again.

Ken took a deep breath, glanced at Mike and then held up his drink. Throwing his shoulders back, allowing his gaze to fall onto everyone gathered at the reception he said, “This next poem involves a little audience participation. I trust you’ll humour me by raising your glasses when requested.”

There was a murmur of obvious approval from the guests.

Roy and Ray sat forward in their seats as though they were eager to hear more.

“Please raise a glass and toast true love,” Ken began. “You deserve this happiness. / Your smiles show who you’re thinking of / Please raise a glass and toast true love.”

He savoured the silence at the end of the line for a beat, enjoying the way the guests were smiling approval for him to continue. Glasses were raised. Ice cubes tinkled musically across the room. Ken’s gaze met Mike’s and for an instant he almost forgot the line he had been about to recite. It came back to him in a thankful rush and he tried not to let the relief show on his face.

“These humble words aren’t good enough / Some souls are surely blessed.”

He paused and turned to Roy and Ray, his glass still held high in tribute.

“Please raise a glass and toast true love. / You deserve this happiness.”

This time he knew that Mike was the one who started the applause but the theatricality of that detail didn’t matter. All that mattered was that Roy and Ray were happy with their celebrations and Ken could now move on and start finding
his own happiness. He drained his glass of port and returned to the table where he had been sitting with Mike.

Before he could sit down Mike squeezed Ken’s hand and leant in to give him a kiss. The DJ was making an announcement that music and a buffet would be available shortly and all guests should be making their way through to the hotel’s dance floor. “Perhaps we should leave now?” Mike whispered.

Ken nodded. Now that the poetry had been read there was no reason for them to stay. He started away from the table but Mike pressed something into his hand.

It was the Moleskine.

Ken studied the book uncertainly. “I thought you were keeping hold of this until you’d written a poem for me.”

“I was,” Mike told him. He nodded at the book and said, “I mean, I have. It’s in there.”

Ken opened the book and turned to the final page. He read the words with a smile and glanced up with tears shining in his eyes. Even though he had only read through it once, the words of the haiku were already etched on his memory. And, even though they were written on the last page of the book, Ken felt sure they could be considered to be the start of a beautiful story.

There’s not enough space

In seventeen syllables

To say I love you.

THE END
Betty Swolenski was startled by the faraway clatter of breaking glass. Immediately she knew a robbery was taking place. She stiffened in her chair and glanced toward the closed office door. A robbery? Here at Dildo & Son? Who in their right mind would rob a factory that met orders for sex toys and sundry adult novelties? She supposed the answers to those questions were self-evident.

Times were hard. On an industrial estate where most of the factories were boarded and abandoned, and the remaining warehouses were decorated with battered signs notifying creditors of liquidations and bankruptcy orders, the success of Dildo & Son was proving to be something of a local anomaly.

An enviable anomaly.

The Dildo & Son workforce were only a small number. But they each took annual holidays and most of them met their personal bills and none of them, to the best of Betty’s knowledge, had to run a second job to cover life’s additional expenses. Big Eric, the owner, was currently driving a fairly new Mercedes. And although Betty figured this added to the truth of what she believed about Mercedes owners, she knew for a fact that he’d managed to acquire the car without having to employ some shyster accountant to fiddle figures or cook books.

“Keep the noise down, you dizzy bitch.” It was a shouted whisper. Barely loud enough to be heard but strident with authority. “Someone will hear us if you keep making noise like that.”

Betty strained to hear a response to the exchange.

The air in the building had become so heavy with expectant silence she felt as though she could hear air molecules moving in the newly created draught. She
could hear the emptiness of a building populated only by rows of vacuum packed
vibrators, adult play costumes, and all the other carefully packaged novelty
supplies that were sold by Dildo & Sons.

“Don’t tell me to keep the noise down,” an indignant voice whispered. It was
shrill enough to be female and clearly unhappy with being labelled a ‘dizzy bitch’.
“You’re not the boss. And it’s not like there’s anyone here to hear us.”

The first voice grunted in obvious disbelief. “Didn’t you see that light in
office?”

“I reckon they left that on just to make it look like someone’s in there. My
mother does the same thing when she goes out to the bingo, just in case any tea-
leaves fancy stripping the tins of cat food from her shelves. She reckons that
leaving a light on, and leaving the radio playing, makes burglars think there’s
someone in, even when there isn’t.”

The first voice, clearly the senior member of the partnership, seemed
unimpressed. “I don’t give a stuff what your mother does. I saw a light in that main
office and I think we should be quiet until we’ve made sure there’s no one about.”

“And if there is someone about?”

Betty strained to hear the answer to that question.

“If there is someone about,” the first voice said carefully. “They’d be well-
advised to look the other way whilst we finish our business here.”

Betty pulled out her phone and sent a short text message before putting the
phone into silent mode. She stood up, stealing herself to investigate.

Big Eric had given her clear instructions before leaving for the day.

“Betty, I want you to keep an eye on the security of the warehouse tonight.”
“Security?” she’d marvelled. “You don’t pay me enough to do security on top of all my other duties.”

He’d laughed as though she wasn’t serious. “I don’t need to pay you to be a security guard,” he chuckled. “You can do that in lieu of paying me rent for that room you’re living in at the back of the warehouse.”

And then he’d left her alone in the building and she’d been stuck in the staff room, on the mezzanine above the factory floor, trying to balance her time between inputting a lethargy of outstanding items into the accounting software, watching the grainy unmoving images on the security monitors, and reading an old superhero comic book she’d found in Big Eric’s office.

She supposed it was the superhero comic book that inspired her imagination.

She’d been reading about a hero who went out of his way to make a stand against villainy and defend the world against injustice. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and decided she too should take a stand against villainy and injustice.

The night had turned the office windows to blackened mirrors. She caught a glimpse of reflection. Her shoulder length scarlet locks were a disarray falling over the shoulders of a wash-faded university T-shirt. She was dressed in boyfriend cut jeans (and she was well aware of the irony in wearing boyfriend cut jeans), over a pair of comfortably-battered trainers. Because her shape was slender to the point of skinniness she knew she didn’t cut the daunting figure of a superhero.

The sight of her own uninspiring reflection was so dispiriting she was almost tempted to snatch up her mobile again and simply call the police.

But Betty stopped herself.
Betty’s friends often said, the easiest way to get her to do something was to tell her she couldn’t. Betty had passed her driving test because a boyfriend had told her she was too dumb to drive. Betty had got a job working as head of admin at Dildo & Sons because a former school-friend had suggested Betty would be too much of a prude to consider working on the fringes of the sex-industry.

And now she found herself ready to defy the dispiriting voice of her own self-confidence. Betty agreed that her skinny figure would be unlikely to intimidate either of the villains who had broken into the building. But, still with memories of the costumed comic book hero at the forefront of her mind, she thought there might be a way that she could use her svelte figure as an advantage.

There were a handful of adult play costumes in the office as well as a collection of toys and tester devices. Big Eric was forever being sent examples of the latest genital-stimulating plastic pleasure products to come buzzing from the shores of Taiwan and Hong Kong. Betty grabbed a playsuit, a utility belt and a couple of accoutrements and hurriedly undressed.

“Which way is it?”

The voices were creeping closer. Although they were still whispering Betty could tell this was the woman asking the question.

Her heartbeat quickened as she pulled the T-shirt off, stepped out of her jeans and trainers, and then began to slip into the flimsy latex playsuit. It was black and slick and felt horribly cheap. It was only when the zippered crotch pressed against the centre of her exposed sex that Betty conceded she could understand the potential for arousal in the product. A tingle of electric excitement crackled through her body. The breath caught in her throat and, when she finally allowed it to brush over her lips, her skin felt charged with bristling excitement.
The costume was a black, latex cat-suit. The garment was figure-hugging with a two-way zip that went from the throat to the arsehole. When she zipped it up to her décolletage, Betty could see the shape of her bare breasts perfectly outlined in the sheer, latex front of the outfit. Her nipples, which had hardened with the cold of the building, stood proud and deliciously erect.

The outfit was completed by a mask that slipped snugly over her eyes, gripping the sides of her face like a pair of spectacles.

This time, when Betty checked her reflection in the mirrored-surface of the windows, she thought the figure staring back was far more formidable. She found a pair of substantial heels to go with the costume: inky black and spiked with eight inch stilettos. And, after tying back her unruly scarlet locks into a severe ponytail, she knew her appearance could easily be described as daunting.

But, she thought, she needed more. Her gaze scoured the clutter of the room.

“The main office is up those stairs,” the male voice whispered. “But I’m wanting to clean out their stock of adult supplies before we go for the safe and the payroll.”

“Bloody hell,” thought Betty. “This is an organised robbery.”

“How about we check out the office first,” the woman suggested. “Then, once we’ve cleaned out the safe, you and I can load up the van with as much of the kinky stuff as the van can carry.”

Betty wondered if she ought to rethink her ideas of being a vigilante and trying to foil a robbery without involving the police. It would only take a single phone call and she figured a uniformed response would be out at the industrial estate within five minutes. But she also figured it would take some explaining if she
had to tell the authorities that she was living on the premises on a semi-permanent basis, even though she knew that such a residence contravened the habitation laws of the Dildo & Sons property agreement with the managers of the industrial estate. Admittedly, that would probably not be the police’s first concern. But, eventually, someone would want to know what she was doing there so late on an evening. And such unwanted investigations would undoubtedly lead to her being evicted.

Knowing she had to address the situation alone, Betty stepped into a fully loaded strap-on harness. She pulled it tight, fastening the clips so that the straps hugged her buttocks and crotch with an overly-familiar tightness. Then she pushed a pair of dildos and a couple of other novelties into the pockets of her utility belt, snatched a mean-looking bullwhip from Big Eric’s desk, and strode out onto the mezzanine.

Her heels resounded resplendently on the D-plate of the mezzanine.

“What the fuck?”

She heard the man’s cry of surprise as a beam of torchlight cut through the building’s blackness and caught her in its glare. Aware that she was suddenly the centre of attention, Betty threw her shoulders back and cracked the bullwhip with a well-practiced snap of her wrist.

In the darkness it sounded like a pistol shot.

“Jesus Christ,” the woman exclaimed. “Who the hell is that?”

The response came to Betty without any thought. She drew a deep breath and projected her voice as though she was in a drama-school production.

“My name is Orgasm-Girl,” she declared.
The torchlight fumbled. The beam of dusty yellow light bounced across rows of vibrators, boxed inflatables and all the other stock that was housed in the Dildo & Sons warehouse. “My name is Orgasm-Girl and, unless you leave here now, I’m going to punish you."

“What the fuck?"

“Look out,” the woman warned. Her voice was a low and urgent whisper. “She’s got an erection.”

“Bloody hell! It’s huge.”

Betty snapped the whip again. The sound echoed from the walls of the warehouse. The noise rattled from the corrugated-iron ceiling high above.

The tip of the whip, by some unexpected chance, struck a wall switch and the room was flooded with revelatory light. Betty hadn’t been expecting the brightness but she acted as though this was part of her plan. Basking in the glow of revelation she cried, “Very well. You’ve not heeded the warning of Orgasm-Girl, therefore you must be punished.”

“Punished?”

Standing at the top of the stairs that led up to the mezzanine, Betty said, “Kneel before me and kiss my boots.” She didn’t know where the authority had come from in her voice. She couldn’t understand how her tone seemed to summon both burglars to hurry up the metal stairs that led to the mezzanine, and then fall to their knees before her in stances of obvious supplication.

For the first time she was able to study the intruders. It was difficult to tell much about them from the shapeless clothes and dark hoodies they wore. Betty guessed the dark garments had been chosen so they could keep themselves anonymous beneath the inquisitive gaze of the security cameras. When the male
burglar pushed his hoodie back and lowered his face to the tip of Betty’s shoe, she was pleased to note that he had a swarthy, beard-scrubbed jaw and an engaging, manly smile. The woman, when she pushed her hoodie back, revealed herself to be a striking blonde with ice blue eyes and cheek bones sharp enough to cut glass.

Betty watched as the blonde placed her full lips around the erection that sprouted from the front of the Orgasm-Girl costume. Betty tried not to let her eyes widen as she watched the woman’s face slip closer around the long, thick phallus.

There was no physical pleasure that came from the action. The blonde woman was sucking a plastic cock and the swarthy man was kissing the toes of her high-heeled shoes. But, even though she was experiencing no tactile stimulation, Betty savoured the thrill of euphoria that came from being in control.

They were doing her bidding.

They were slaves to Orgasm-Girl. And, as they were her slaves, Betty knew they would do anything she commanded.

“You,” she called. She snapped her whip for attention and the man on his knees looked meekly up at her.

Betty pulled a thick pink vibrator from her utility belt. It was not particularly large but she knew the model and was confident it had a buzz like a jackhammer on steroids.

“I want you to suck this,” she told him.

Obligingly, he put his lips around the end of the vibrator and sucked.

“Get it good and wet,” she insisted. “Take it to the back of your throat. Get it properly lubricated for me.”

His eyes bulged. His head moved back and forth.
She could feel the stirrings of her own arousal grow to something deep and powerful and unexpected. The inner muscles of her sex clenched and unclenched with a low but quickening pulse. Her heartbeat began to race. She could see that her nipples were standing more erect against the flimsy denier of the Orgasm-Girl suit. She told herself that she needed to properly focus on administering justice before she took proper pleasure from either of the burglars. But, even though she knew the words made sense, it was difficult to heed that instruction.

The blonde continued to suck hungrily on the erection at the front of Betty’s suit. Her head bobbed back and forth and she slurped with a wet and urgent eagerness.

Betty snatched the pink vibrator from the mouth of the male burglar and pushed the implement into his hands. “Use that on her,” Betty commanded.

“Yes, Orgasm-Girl,” he breathed.

The blonde’s large expressive eyes glanced from Betty to her fellow burglar who was now brandishing a vibrator. She nodded easy consent and pushed her shapeless jeans down. Betty didn’t know if the woman wasn’t wearing panties or if she had simply managed to grasp the underwear at the same time as she caught the waistband of her jeans. Either way, she peeled herself naked in half an instant and pushed the bare flesh of her exposed sex towards her swarthy partner.

Betty could see the wetness glistening from the woman’s pussy lips.

She empathised with the blonde’s obvious excitement. She suspected, if her own sex was similarly exposed at this moment, the flesh there would be equally slick and dewy with arousal. Brooding on that idea, she became aware of the pressure of the zip’s teeth resting against the febrile lips of her sex.

She shook her head, knowing there was no time to dwell on the thought.
The blonde had her hole stuffed by the bulbous pink vibrator and she was moaning as a rush of pleasure coursed through her. Betty could see the smile of satisfaction on the swarthy jaw of the man. It was briefly mirrored in the gleam of eager lust worn by the woman he was pleasuring. Then the blonde had turned back to suck the erection on the front of Betty’s Orgasm-Girl costume whilst the guy behind took her to a vibrator buzzing climax.

“Oh my God,” the blonde groaned. The words were made almost inarticulate as she shaped them around the plastic phallus that filled her mouth. “Oh my God. Oh my God.” She repeated the words with less breath and more volume until they became an unintelligible roar. Eventually she spat Betty’s cock from her mouth and collapsed at the top of the mezzanine steps.

“My turn,” Betty grunted.

She retrieved a pair of handcuffs from her utility belt and tossed them to the man. Nodding at the blonde she said, “Fasten her to the rails up here in a kneeling position.”

He didn’t bother to question the instruction. It took him a few short seconds and the near-naked blonde was secured as Betty had commanded. Given that the blonde had just endured an orgasm sufficiently strong to leave her still trembling, Betty supposed the woman likely had no idea that her wrists were now bound.

The remaining burglar turned to study Betty. His smile was broad with lust as he studied the contours of her latex-clad body. She saw his eyebrows flinch suggestively as he examined the shape of her stiff nipples.

She glanced toward the blonde and the movement of her head was enough to make him follow her gaze.

“We could do her together,” Betty purred.
As she spoke, she reached down and stroked the thrust of his arousal.

He groaned.

“I’ll give you a choice of what you can do now,” she murmured. “But there’s a condition attached to the options.”

He frowned but nodded for her to continue.

“We could spit-roast your girlfriend,” Betty suggested. “I could use my erection on her pussy. You could fill her face with this…”

Her fingers again traced the shape of his arousal. She allowed the contact to linger long enough for her to feel the pulse of his need. He shivered but she was pleased to note that he didn’t try to pull away from her touch.

“…or,” she said eventually. “You could leave me here alone to fuck your girlfriend whilst you go outside and fix that window you broke.”

He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts.

He looked puzzled and she could understand his confusion.

She hadn’t yet told him the condition.

Laughing uncertainly he asked, “Why would I want to go and fix the window?”

“If you don’t pick that option, I’ll be phoning the police,” Betty explained.

She grabbed the blonde’s rear and guided her plastic erection inside the woman. Betty was thrilled to hear the blonde’s gasp of satisfaction as she pushed deep into the wet confines of her sex. Her sex was so wet it made a greedy squelching sound as Betty pushed deeper.

“If you don’t pick the option to fix the window,” Betty repeated, “I’ll be phoning the police and I suspect they’ll be here within five minutes.” She bucked her hips forward three times, impaling the blonde deeper with each thrust.
The woman groaned each time.

Her cries were loud enough to echo around the warehouse of Dildo & Sons.

“Of course,” Betty continued, still sliding in and out of the blonde, “If I did call the police, you might have time to get away. But your girlfriend here will still be cuffed to the railings.”

The blonde sobbed.

Betty didn’t know if the sound was borne from the dread of being captured by the police or the arousal that came from being impaled on the fat length of Orgasm-Girl’s erection. Given that the blonde was squirming back against her, Betty supposed it was most likely the latter of those two options.

“I don’t know what sort of relationship you guys have,” Betty continued.

She lazily rode back and forth into the blonde. She was enjoying the rocking motion. She began to wish she’d been born with a penis. For the first time in her life she was beginning to understand the appeal of owning such an appendage.

“But,” she went on. “If I were in this woman’s position, and the police caught me with my slick, well-fucked pussy on display, my wrists cuffed to metal railings, and in a predicament where my boyfriend had left to take the fall for trespassing on private property whilst being equipped with burglary tools,” she nodded towards the bags that the pair had left at the bottom of the mezzanine stairs. “If that had happened to me, I’d tell the police exactly where to find you.”

The burglar looked fully chagrined.

“Are you serious?”

She shook her head. “Orgasm-Girl is always serious.” She placed a hand in the centre of his chest and said, “If you get the window repaired swiftly enough, I
might let you come back and join us. But, if you don’t do it, I’ll have to make sure you suffer the full penalty of the law.”

She could see the hesitation on his face. He glanced from the beautiful, available blonde to Betty’s erection, and then down into the darkness of the warehouse where an empty window frame awaited his attention.

“Can’t we just play for five minutes more?” he begged.

Betty pulled a phone from her utility belt and nodded agreement. “Of course,” she agreed. “Five minutes will be enough for my satisfaction. And it will be enough for hers. It will also be long enough to let the police get here.” She paused with her fingertip over the keypad and said, “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

There was a long moment when his gaze went from Orgasm-Girl’s erection, buried deep in the blonde’s exposed pussy, and then to the blonde’s face and her full, red lips.

Miserably, he shook his head and stamped down the mezzanine stairs.

“You’ve foiled me this time, Orgasm-Girl,” he grumbled. “But I’ll be back when I’ve fixed that window. I’ll be back.”

Betty listened to his footsteps fading into the distance as she continued to thrust her plastic length in and out of the blonde. “He won’t be back,” she murmured. “Not this evening.”

“Why not?” asked the blonde. The words came out as an automatic grunt. She sounded so caught up with her own arousal that she clearly didn’t care. The words were spoken more as a matter of tertiary, polite interest. “Have you called the police?” asked the blonde.
“No,” Betty said. “I’m Orgasm-Girl. I promised him I wouldn’t phone the police if he did as I asked. And Orgasm-Girl always keeps her promises.” She smiled slyly to herself and added, “But I didn’t tell your boyfriend that two of Big Eric’s private security thugs are waiting outside. I’d sent them a text message earlier. And, once they get hold of your boyfriend, they’re not going to let him back in here.”

“Does that mean I’m trapped here at your mercy?” the blonde sighed. She did not sound inordinately troubled by the prospect. If anything, Betty thought she could detect a hopeful inflection in the woman’s voice.

“Yes,” Betty agreed. She snapped the bullwhip so it cracked like a pistol shot. “You’re trapped here at my mercy. And your punishment will last for the rest of the night.”

“Oh no!” the blonde sighed as Betty pushed back into her. There was something that sounded close to genuine regret in her voice as she said, “I guess this will teach me never again to fall foul of Orgasm-Girl.”

THE END