UNCONVENTIONAL NARRATIVE SCHEMES
IN THE MODERN ENGLISH NOVEL:
THE CONSCIOUS USE OF THEMATIC ELEMENTS
AS STORY-STRUCTURING DEVICES

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# Table of contents

0. Introduction 3

1. Conventional narrative theory and traditional story structures 5

2. Unconventional narrative structures 9

3. Case studies 14
   3.1 Going backwards in *Time’s Arrow* 14
      3.1.1 Introduction 14
      3.1.2 Summary 15
      3.1.3 Narrative structure: the reversal of chronology 17
      3.1.4 Reverse chronology as retrospective therapy 23
   3.2 The setup, the performance and *The Prestige* 29
      3.2.1 Introduction 29
      3.2.2 Summary 29
      3.2.3 Stage and story illusions 37
   3.3 The chess game in *Through the Looking-Glass* 41
      3.3.1 Introduction 41
      3.3.2 Summary 42
      3.3.3 The chessboard landscape: Alice and the chess pawns 45
      3.3.4 Becoming a Queen: implications of being a pawn 51

4. Conclusion 57

5. Works cited 58
0. Introduction

This dissertation will deal with how certain authors of English prose very consciously use thematic elements as devices that profoundly shape their stories’ narrative structures. The results are works of fiction that not only provide readers with an intellectual challenge, but also with a structural one, adding more depth to the reading experience. I will look at several novels that employ these particular unconventional narrative schemes. All of the works studied in this dissertation belong to modern English literature, although it should be noted that the term modern is used here in its broadest sense: the oldest novel analysed was written at the end of the nineteenth century, whereas the most recent one was written in 1995. Below is a list of novels that serve as highly interesting case studies:

- *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis:
  the author uses reverse chronology to suggest that the way to see (or even to comprehend) the Holocaust is by looking at it backwards.

- *The Prestige* by Christopher Priest:
  story developments mirror the three parts of a stage illusion, i.e. the setup, the performance, and the prestige (effect).

- *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carroll:
  the solution to a chess problem is used by the author as a plot-structuring device.

I have included these three novels because after reading them out of personal interest, the close connection between their respective themes and narrative structures immediately became apparent. I am aware that other modern English novels exist with similar thematic
story structures, but for reasons of brevity, I will only analyse the three novels mentioned above.

Of course, by labelling their story structures unconventional, we cannot examine them without first having a brief look at how traditional narrative schemes are constructed. Hence, an opening chapter on conventional narrative structures will be included, in which an attempt will be made at constituting a (broad) definition of traditional story structures.

After this introductory chapter, I will provide an overview of typical characteristics and structural strategies found in less conventional approaches to narrative structuring, often found in modernist writing.


In the last chapter then, which will be the main focus of this dissertation, I will attempt to illustrate that the novels mentioned above are all characterized by their use of thematic elements as story-structuring devices, which can be regarded as being unconventional in modern English literature. Furthermore, I will examine if these thematic narratives schemes have implications for or bear importance to the messages conveyed in the novels.
1. Conventional narrative theory and traditional story structures

In this introductory chapter, I will have a brief look at how conventional narratives are structured. In *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, narrative structure is said to “be regarded as relating exclusively to story or as relating to the discourse that that presents that story” (366). For reasons of briefness, only the former sense will be discussed in this chapter. In this narrower sense, narrative structure is defined as “the (structured) relationship of narrative events within a story” (366). In this introduction, I will try to illustrate that many works of traditional fiction are characterized by sharing a fundamentally conventional narrative structure. This will be done by having a brief look at different models of story grammars (so called story schemata), as well as by attempting to define a ‘simple’ narrative.

In order to gain a better insight into how stories are constructed, several literary critics have attempted to construct story schemata: a set of universal rules, that “bear on the types on content that unfold in stories and the ways in which these content components are causally related to one another” (Herman et al. 568). *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* provides a clear example of such a story schema:

According to two of the story grammar models (Mandler and Johnson 1977; Stein and Glenn 1919) the central high-order unit of a story is an *episode* and includes seven categories: setting, initiating event, internal response, goal, attempt, consequence, and reaction. The *setting* introduces a specific animate protagonist and contains information referring to the physical, social, or temporal context of the story. The *initiating event* marks some change in the protagonist’s environment. The *internal response*’s major function is to evoke an emotion or belief in the protagonist. The *goal* describes the protagonist’s
desire to achieve a goal or change of state, which motivates the protagonist to carry out an attempt, a set of overt actions in service of the goal. The attempt results in consequence, signifying whether the protagonist succeeded in attaining the goal. The final type of information in a story is a reaction. Three types of information can be classified as reactions: (1) the protagonist’s emotional and cognitive responses to goal attainment or failure; (2) future consequences that occur as a result of goal attainment or failure; (3) a moral, summarizing what the character learned from achieving or pursuing a goal.

Another well-known story schema is the model by Vladimir Propp, developed in his 1928 book *Morphology of the Folktale* (191). Propp analysed a corpus of 100 Russian folktales and attempted to assert that all of these tales could be reduced to a single structure. In his model, he made a distinction between functions and characters (125). A function was defined by Propp as “an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action” (qtd. in Herman et al. 191). Examples of such a function include “the return of the hero” and “the villain is punished” (191). Propp concluded that there were thirty-one core functions that constitute the fundamental components to every tale, and that – whereas some of these event types were optional – those functions have a strict order or sequence (191). Within these functions, characters could participate by playing one (or more) of the following seven roles: hero, villain, donor, helper, dispatcher, sought-for person, and false hero (191).

A last example of such a story grammar is the influential revision of Propp’s morphology by Algirdas Greimas. Greimas, attempting to create “a systematic framework for describing how characters participate in narrated action,” centered his model on so-called actants: “general categories of behaviour or doing underlying all narratives” (1). Greimas identified six of these
fundamental roles: Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper and Opponents (1). He said of his own scheme:

its simplicity lies in the fact that it is entirely centred on the object of desire aimed at by the subject and situated, as object of communication, between the sender and the receiver – the desire of the subject being, in its part, modulated in projections from the helper and opponent. (qtd. in Herman et al. 1)

Although differences between these story grammars can be found, all models are characterized by a strong emphasis on the “logical/causal connections that should link the components of a story” (568). In other words, in a well-structured story “a causal chain can be formed from the beginning to the end” (569).

Another important concept when defining a traditional, simple narrative, is that of temporality. This study of temporal ordering “involves the relationship between events in the story (fabula) of the represented world, and their arrangements in the discourse (sjuzhet) which articulates them” (Herman et. al 591). Deviations between the chronological sequence of events in the story and their ordering in the discourse are of great importance with regards to plot-structuring, and allow for a distinction to be made between linear or non-linear narratives. Historically, storytelling was often characterized by a high degree of linearity, boasting the virtues of plot coherence, intelligibility and memorability (592). Examples of such linear narratives include epics, picaresque novels, Bildungsromans and serial publications (592). Hence, it can be said that traditional stories are characterized by a relatively simple and straightforward chronology.

Similar insights can be gained from making a distinction between simple and complex
stories, as done by Patrick O’Neill in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. O’Neill provides an excellent description of simple narrative schemes:

Evidently, the originary model of the narrative account *per se* is chronologically linear, beginning at the beginning (‘once upon a time’) and proceeding in orderly fashion through a middle of greater or lesser length to an end … Unsurprisingly, it is also the model of many literary narratives ... It continues to be the model for much popular fiction, including romance novels, adventure stories, school stories, sea stories, war stories, westerns, and so on. In its simplest form, the model is both linear and additive, involving stories in which a single protagonist (or group of protagonists) sets out to achieve a particular end, encounters in the process an indefinite number of obstacles and opponents …, overcomes them with varying degrees of difficulty and possibly with the assistance of a helper or helpers, and duly achieves the desired end.

(Herman et al. 367)

Again, strong emphasis is laid on a story’s causal qualities, as well as on its linearity and clear chronology.

In the next chapter, I will explain how modern narratives increasingly part from the characteristics mentioned above, which for a long time have become something of a convention or norm for structuring literary stories, but rather employ more complex narrative techniques, including denunciation of strict chronology and the multi-plotting of storylines to increase causal complexity.
2. Unconventional narrative structures

In classical and medieval times, literary authors were expected to structure their plays and novels according to certain prescriptive principles. However, modern narratives have shown themselves “increasingly hostile to normative notions of structure,” and it can even be said that one of the main characteristics of modern literature has become “its overt willingness to transgress prescriptive structural dogma” (Herman et al. 367).

Unarguably, formal prescriptions for modern literary works have become far less rigid than in times past. Yet many novels still continue to rely heavily on the repetition of basic plot formulae. However, some works of fiction deliberately distance themselves from such traditional narrative plots:

… the classics of high literature each deviate in an original way from any previous set formula. For Eco … repetition in a genre with a formulaic plot gives the reader pleasure because it allows him ‘to recognize something he has already seen and of which he has grown fond’. The structure of this type of plot, Eco concludes, leads the reader to ‘imaginative laziness’. (Herman et al. 438-439)

In order to avoid this ‘laziness’, certain authors consciously avoid employing traditional schemes of events in their narratives, but instead choose more challenging, unconventional story structures. Although there is a great deal of variation to be found in the way these structures differ from their traditional counterparts, two general strategies can be found that are of significant relevance to this dissertation and the discussion of thematic narrative structures: denunciation of strict chronology and the use of multi-plot narratives.
denunciation of strict chronology

Rather than “proceeding chronologically through a series of carefully arranged events,” several authors have chosen to undermine “this conventional chronological development as a structuring basis for fiction” (Herman et al. 317-318). Modernists in particular have expressed “explicit hostility to clockwork chronology” (318) because, as Virginia Woolf states in Modern Fiction, “life is not a series… symmetrically arranged” (qtd. in Herman et al. 317). Important when dealing with this innovation in terms of temporality, is the distinction between narrating time (or discourse time) and narrated time (or story time), where discourse time is “measured in words or pages of text or in the hours of reading time” and story time represents “the temporal duration and chronology of the underlying plot” (608). This distinction ties in with the narratological dichotomy between discourse (sjuzhet) and story (or fabula). It can be assumed that the story level of a narrative, i.e. “the sequence of events reconstructed from the surface level of the linguistic medium” (609), usually has a chronological order. In contrast, the discourse level is often characterized by reshufflings of chronology to produce a number of anachronies (609), a term coined by French structuralist Gérard Genette to indicate chronological deviations such as analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis (flashforward) (591). Narratologist Monika Fludernik describes this difference in temporality between story and discourse as follows:

Thus, on the story level, temporality is conceptualised in the common sense ‘objective’ manner that we all take for granted. On the discourse level, with the reading or viewing of narrative discourse, however, a cognitive order of temporality is instituted which is based, not on sequentiality or chronology, but on holistic structures of narrative comprehension. (Herman et al. 610)
The main motive for modern writers to opt for anachrony was that they experienced clockwork temporality as being too restrictive and artificial. Consequently, instead of relying on “time on the clock,” as Woolf puts it, they relied on “time in the mind” (qtd. in Herman et al. 319). This allowed authors to add a more subjective component to their narrations, “foregrounding significant personal values rather than objective causal links, and emphasising the psychological … qualities of non-linearity” (592):

This redefinition of narrative as rendering not necessarily a plot but a character’s or narrator’s experiential reality was influenced by insights from conversational narratives in which the point of the story is not merely ‘what happened’ but, especially, what the experience meant to the narrator and what he or she wanted to convey with it. (610)

As will become clear from the next chapter, Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* serves as an excellent example of such an anachronous novel: not only is the temporality employed in this novel highly unconventional because of its reversal of chronology, the author consciously chose this structure to illustrate that the process of narrating is itself meaningful to the narrator. Time, as the reader learns, proves to provide the narrator with a retrospective therapeutic process, which is an excellent illustration of the point made by Hungarian literary critic György Lukács, who suggested that “modernism’s inward focalization and anachronous temporality are primarily forms of escapism; ways of evading history, political responsibility, and the immediate stresses of the contemporary world” (qtd. in Herman et al. 319). Hence, the narrative structure of *Time’s Arrow* is of great importance to the story’s theme and can thus be labelled thematic, as will be discussed in the final chapter.
- the use of multi-plot narratives

In the first chapter, a distinction was made between ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ stories, where the first was defined as being “both linear and additive” (Herman et al. 367). In order to obtain a more challenging narrative, several modern authors chose to trade in these linear and additive properties for a more complex interconnection of multiple storylines (368):

Flaunted elaboration of narrative structuration is a prominent feature of (post)modernist novels, many of which challenge their readers to unravel sophisticated structural complexities. (368)

Modern authors often use parallel narratives to increase their stories’ richness, and the use of such narratives is often of crucial importance with regards to understanding the narrated events:

Parallel narratives, however unrelated their individual concerns may appear to be, nonetheless serve at least by implication both as mutual commentaries and as sources of potential enrichment. (368)

A common strategy in multi-plot narratives is the use of sequential narrators. In these narratives, the readers’ understanding of the story “grows gradually out of their efforts to reconcile a series of partially conflicting accounts by a succession of separate and to a greater and lesser degree overtly unreliable narrators” (368-369).

An interesting example of such a multi-plot narrative is The Prestige, in which author Christopher Priest narrates a fin-de-siècle rivalry between two magicians through their journals and those of their respective family members nearly a century later. Coherence between these different accounts is established through the novel’s thematic narrative structure, which is modelled to mirror to the three parts of stage illusion and will be discussed in the next chapter.
From this next chapter, it will become clear that the narrative structures of two of the novels that will be analysed, *Time’s Arrow* and *The Prestige*, originate from the characteristics mentioned above, taken to their almost hyperbolic extreme. But instead of resulting in an incomprehensible maze, as is often the case with formal experiments, their narrative structures enrich the novels’ qualities because of their direct relationship with their respective themes. It should be noted that the third novel, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, is not mentioned in this chapter because its structure does not originate from an experimental chronological development or complexity in plotting. It is included in this dissertation because the narrative structure is unconventional in its incorporation of a solution to a chess problem, in which traditional linearity (as described in story schemata, discussed in the previous chapter) is replaced by a fixed order of moves, as will be further elaborated in the next chapter.
3. Case studies

3.1 Going backwards in Time’s Arrow

3.1.1 Introduction

In 1991, English novelist Martin Amis, son of Sir Kingsley Amis, published *Time’s Arrow*. Sometime before that, inspired by a passage from Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse 5* and a short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer, Amis began contemplating the idea of “telling the story of a man’s life backwards in time” (Amis 175). Further inspired by his friend Robert Jay Lifton, author of *The Nazi Doctors*, *Time’s Arrow* became a novel that would retell the story of the Holocaust in its own way (175).

This case study will deal with the important connection between the story’s reverse chronology and its theme, which I will try to prove, is why the author chose this unconventional narrative structure over a more traditional one. In order to gain full understanding of this connection, I will first provide a brief summary of *Time’s Arrow*, from which the main theme will become apparent (3.1.2). Secondly, I will analyse the novel’s structure, i.e. the reverse chronology, illustrating this analysis with passages from the novel (3.1.3). Finally, I will explain how the theme and the narrative strategy used are intertwined, and why the employed narrative structure is essential for a full understanding of the story and the moral message it conveys (3.1.4).
3.1.2 Summary

The narrator of the story is a voice that lives inside a man named Tod Friendly. He is a bystander and cannot control what Tod says or does in any way. The narrator sees Tod's life progressing backwards—from death to birth. He is Tod's disembodied consciousness that comes to life as his double is about to die. Most life events confuse him because he sees them occurring backwards. He sees Tod getting stronger and more virile as he recovers and grows noticeably younger.

Tod "starts" a long-term relationship with a woman named Irene, which commences with her leaving him for good. Again, the narrator is trying to rationalize the reverse events in the tumultuous relationship. He works as a doctor and his actions to help people are viewed as hurtful by the narrator because people come to him well and leave in pain. Tod seems to be a tortured man; he has nightmares about doctors and babies. He has a sordid past that he is running from. The narrator has an intuitive grasp of this and also knows that life cannot be altered because suicide is not possible.

Tod’s name changes to John Young. John is living in New York and is tipped off by his accomplice, reverend Nicholas Kreditor, that the authorities are aware of him. Hence, a change of identity is required. John's life gets better while he is still living quietly in the country. He is a popular doctor and has many friends. He is a womanizer and has many girlfriends, including Irene. The narrator is very disturbed by John's work at the hospital. He works on traumatic cases which, when viewed in reverse, are interpreted by the narrator as John hurting people.

For reasons of clarity, I will refer to this narrator as ‘he,’ as I believe this voice represents the consciousness of the male protagonist of the story.
John leaves for Europe to fight in the war, although in actuality, he is fleeing Europe to travel to America. His name changes to Hamilton de Souza while he lives in Portugal for a short time. He then travels through Europe to Italy, and finally back to Germany, where his name is Odilo Unverdorben.

As novel and narrator are hurtled into the inevitable past, the reader is given several indications that the protagonist hides a terrible secret, for instance:

He is travelling towards his secret. Parasite or passenger, I am travelling there with him. It will be bad. It will be bad, and not intelligible. But I will know one thing about it (and at least the certainty brings comfort): I will know how bad the secret is. I will know the nature of the offence. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time. (Amis 72-73)

As the story progresses, it is revealed that his secret hinges on his involvement in the Nazi atrocities of the Holocaust: Odilo works at Auschwitz.

After seeing Tod through several incognitos, the reader and the narrator learn that Tod once had the identity, and the narrator now occupies the body, of Odilo Unverdorben, one of the Nazi doctors at Auschwitz. (Menke 962)

Here, the narrator sees his work as magical and almost saintly, watching thousands of living, breathing human beings emerge from the piles of corpses in the gas ovens. Odilo works closely with a character named Uncle Pepi, “a fictional double for Josef Mengele” (963), in the experimentation rooms. His wife Herta does not approve of his work. Their child, Eva, dies shortly after birth.
Before the concentration camp, Odilo works at "lesser" facilities which "process" unwanted people like the insane and the handicapped. The narrator is upset by this decline in "great work." His relationship with Herta grows more intense as they move towards their marriage, then fades as they get to know each other. Odilo is by then back at medical school. Eventually, he moves home with his family and becomes a child. The narrator is upset knowing his life will end at Odilo's birth.

As becomes clear from the above summary, the central theme in *Time's Arrow* revolves around temporal matters. As a reader, we witness how the narrator perceives the cycle of life and we become aware of his perception of history and its events (the Holocaust of course assuming a central position). In the next section, I will discuss how this importance of temporality is present in the narrative structure itself.

### 3.1.3 Narrative structure: the reversal of chronology

In *Time’s Arrow*, which is a veritable formal tour-de-force, Martin Amis rejects traditional chronology. He even takes this denunciation to an extreme by writing “a narrative in which everything goes backwards, from end to beginning,” i.e. an overtly experimental narrative that is retrogressive (Herman et al. 370). This reversal of the temporal order is mentioned directly when the title is hinted at near the end of the first part of the novel:

> Like writing, paintings seem to hint at a topsy-turvy world in which, so to speak, time’s arrow moves the other way. The invisible speedlines suggest a different nexus of sequence and process. (Amis 95)
The novel’s title, as well as its curious temporality, is inspired by the study of thermodynamics. In his article on the thermodynamics of history in *Time’s Arrow*, Richard Menke defines thermodynamics as “the physics of heat and its relation to other forms of energy” (Menke 960). This link between Amis’s novel and the study of thermodynamics is of considerable importance; hence I will provide a short explanation (taken directly from Menke’s article) of the main thermodynamic principles and of the second law in particular, which “describes the inescapable increase in entropy in closed physical systems” (961):

> Classical physics (along with many fields of twentieth-century physics, for that matter) describes a universe in which phenomena are in principle reversible. One body collides with another, say, and forces are redistributed; run the events backward and the collision is equally obedient to the laws of classical physics. Yet this temporal symmetry contradicts our human experience of a universe in which things happen forward, in which events do not seem reversible. To cite several of the customary examples: an egg never unscrambles, a cold cup of coffee never regains the heat it has lost to its surroundings, a shuffled deck of cards never returns to its original order by means of any amount of subsequent shuffling, the scattered balls on a pool table never triangulate themselves back into the shape of the rack. Whence, then, arises the apparent directionality of time? Nineteenth-century physics traced the problem to thermodynamics, the study of heat and energy transfer. According to the first law of thermodynamics, the total amount of energy in a closed system is invariable; energy is conserved. However, according to the second law of thermodynamics, heat will flow from a warmer region to a cooler one, but not vice versa; therefore, in a closed system the amount of energy that is unusable (having already flowed to the cooler region and unable
to flow back) will always tend to increase. After the cup of coffee cools, the air around it and the table under it contain much of the energy that once warmed the coffee; the total amount of heat in the room has not changed (if we neglect the fact that the room is not truly a closed system), but the energy is so scattered that it is not recoverable for use. In 1865 the German physicist Rudolf Clausius termed this unusable energy entropy, borrowing the same root as trope ("turning, transformation") to devise a neologism in analogy to energy. In its best-known form, the second law stipulates that the entropy or disorder in a closed system will always increase as time passes. (969-970)

It is therefore this second law of thermodynamics, this inescapable increase of total entropy, which marks the direction of time (970). This inspired physicist A.S. Eddington to coin the phrase “time’s arrow” to denote “the directionality of time” (959-960). Eddington said of this principle:

I shall use the phrase "time's arrow" to express this one-way property of time which has no analogue in space. It is a singularly interesting property from a philosophical standpoint. We must note that (1) It is vividly recognised by consciousness. (2) It is equally insisted on by our reasoning faculty, which tells us that a reversal of the arrow would render the external world nonsensical. (3) It makes no appearance in physical science except in the study of organisation of a number of individuals (that is, individual molecules, objects, or pieces).

(qtd. in Menke 970)

I believe this principle of time as an arrow, including the one-way property of time and more importantly the reversal thereof, has clearly influenced Amis’s decision to radically reverse his story’s chronology by “pointing time’s arrow in the linear opposite direction to the norm” (Marta 42).
Throughout *Time’s Arrow*, we find several examples of the narrator explicitly mentioning this unusual chronology: “What is the – what is the sequence of the journey I’m on?” (14), “It just seems to me that the film is running backwards.” (16) and “Is it just me, or is this a weird way to carry on?” (18).

To gain familiarity with this reversal of temporal events, I have included several extracts that clearly illustrate the retrogressive structure employed throughout the entire novel.

Eating is unattractive too. First I stack the clean plates in the dishwasher, which works okay, I guess, like all my other labour-saving devices, until some fat bastard shows up in his jumpsuit and traumatizes them with his tools. So far so good: then you select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short wait. Various items get gulped up into my mouth, and after skilful massage with tongue and teeth I transfer them to the plate for additional sculpture with knife and fork and spoon. That bit’s quite therapeutic at least, unless you’re having soup or something, which can be a real sentence. Next you face the laborious business of cooling, of reassembly, of storage, before the return of these foodstuffs to the Superette, where, admittedly, I am promptly and generously reimbursed for my pains. Then you tool down the aisles, with trolley or basket, returning each can and packet to its rightful place. (Amis 19)

Round it off with a cocktail, we finish our meal and sit there doggedly describing it to the waiter, with the menus there to jog our memory. (61)
Tennis is a pretty dumb game, I’m finding: the fuzzy ball jumps out of the net, or out of the chicken wire at the back of the court, and the four of us bat it around until it is pocketed – quite arbitrarily, it seems to me – by the server. (20-21)

When people move – when they travel – they look where they’ve come from, not where they’re going. Is this what the human beings always do? Then love will be like driving, which doesn’t appear to make much immediate sense. For example, you have five reverse gears and only one for forward, which is marked ‘R’, for Reverse. When we drive, we don’t look where we’re going. We look where we came from. (30)

… we still need to cry sometimes until Father takes the pain away with a rhythmical upward sweep of his rattling hand. Then we are happy again … (171).

This reverse chronology is sometimes used to obtain a comical effect, for instance:

He takes toys from children, on the street. He does. The kid will be standing there, with flustered mother, with big dad. Tod’ll come on up. The toy, the squeaky duck or whatever, will be offered to him by the smiling child. Tod takes it. And backs away, with what I believe is a shiteating grin. The child’s face turns blank, or closes. Both toy and smile are gone: he takes both toy and smile. For what? A couple of bucks. Can you believe this guy? He’ll take candy from a baby, if there’s fifty cents in it for him. (22-23)
Tod goes to church and everything … We sit in lines and worship a corpse.

But it’s clear what Tod’s after. Christ, he’s so shameless. He always takes a really big bill from the bowl. (23)

However, the reversal of temporal order is primarily employed to render the account of unsettling events even more startling:

One morning of diagonal sleet and frozen puddles we were unloading some Jewish families at a rude hamlet on the River Bug. It was the usual sequence: we’d picked up this batch from the mass grave, in the woods, and stood waiting by the van on the approach road while the carbon monoxide went about its work … We then drove them closer to town, where one of our men was readying the piles of clothes. Out they all filed. Among them was a mother and a baby, both naked, naturally, for now … she looked stunned – stopped dead in the face. For a moment I wondered if she’d fully come round from the carbon monoxide. I was concerned. We then escorted this group of about thirty souls into a low warehouse … these Jews, led by the weeping baby, made their solemn way past a series of curtains and blankets suspended from the ceiling and, one by one, backed their way through a missing panel in the wall. This panel I myself replaced with a softly spoken ‘Guten Tag’ … ‘Raus! Raus!’ I shouted – to the men, who romped off to explore the premises, and to lay out some trinkets, and some food, some bread and tomatoes, say, as was traditional, for the Jews’ later use. (149-150)

I believe that the novel’s narrative structure has become sufficiently clear from the above passages and thus needs no further explanation. In the final section, I will look at how this narrative structure plays a meaningful role in understanding the story’s events and main theme, i.e. the Holocaust and the trauma such an event has caused to all those involved.
3.1.4 Reverse chronology as retrospective therapy

At first sight, the unconventional story structure of *Time’s Arrow* seems to be nothing more than an ambitious formal experiment, a challenging approach to narrating a story. However, as the events progress, i.e. as the reader goes further backward in the life of the central figure (Abbott 17), it becomes clear that this reverse chronology is of great importance to the novel’s theme: “we become aware of early events and actions that cast a devastating moral light on his later opinions and behavior” (17). Hence, this intertwining of structure (story) and theme (fabula) is meaningful:

Ordering the events in chronological sequence, one forms an impression of the difference between fabula and story. The interventions in chronology which become manifest can be significant for the vision of the fabula which they imply. (Bal 214)

In what follows, I will try to illustrate that the reverse chronology found in *Time’s Arrow* is essential for a thorough understanding of the novel’s story and moral message, and that it is precisely because of this connection between theme and structure that the novel’s narrative scheme becomes more than merely a formal experiment.

Throughout the novel, there are many allusions to the process of forgetting, of eroding one’s memories to feel better:

All three of us know that John has a secret. Only one of us knows what that secret is. He leaves it undisclosed, which is perhaps the best thing to do with secrets. (Amis 98).
The ship’s route is clearly delineated on the surface of the water and is violently consumed by our advance. Thus we leave no marks on the ocean, as if we are successfully covering our tracks. (109)

And I suppose, in our case, John and I should exchange high-fives in squalid thanks to this human talent for forgetting: forgetting, not as a process of erosion and waste, but as an activity. (89)

However, the narrator, that is the protagonist’s soul, soon realizes that to forget what happened in times past is not a solution, because it is “Time, the human dimension, which makes us everything we are” (76). On the contrary, it is Time that allows one to gain insight and eventually to heal one’s wounds. Time is thus seen as a therapeutic instrument:

   I thought of the chessplayers in the Park, where we sat for so many hours, the chessplayers, more various than the pieces they wielded (the players not erect, not regulated, but mumbling, shambling, rhomboid). Each game, it’s true, begins in disarray and goes through episodes of contortion and crosspurpose. But things work out. All that scowl and elbow and tenseness of posture, all that agony – it works out. One final tug on the white pawn, and perfect order is restored; and the players at last look up, smiling and rubbing their hands. Time will tell, and I put my trust in time, absolutely. (77)

Apart from offering a process of personal healing, the retrogressive narrative structure also allows readers to gain insight into and understanding of important events that happened in the past. Because of his conscious use of a highly unconventional narrative structure, Amis successfully challenges familiar perceptions of such events, as Jan Marta states:
By this one narrative maneuver the novel thoroughly defamiliarizes the familiar and alters perception in an unequivocal, irrevocable manner such that the reader cannot possibly view everyday life, doctoring, or any personal or collective history, as represented in this novel, with the same reflex banality bred by overfamiliarity with conventional narrative representation. (43)

Amis’s novel thus has the “power to disconcert and rout the reader from well-worn narrative paths and to engage the reader in an experiential process of inquiry” (65). The author uses this act of defamiliarization as a way to tackle one of the most upsetting events of the 20th-century from a different vantage point (Rossant 4), namely the Holocaust, which is at the core of the troubled life of Time’s Arrow’s protagonist. By using a reverse chronology, a world is created in which everything is turned upside down and in which nothing seems to make sense. It is precisely because of this seemingly nonsensical approach towards the narrated events (and more specifically towards the atrocities committed by the Nazi’s during the Second World War) that Amis is capable of conveying his message, i.e. that “only in a world turned completely upside down could such a horrendous tragedy occur” (Rossant 4). This attempt at understanding, at making sense, is signalled by the narrator, who – upon arrival at Auschwitz Central – declares that “the world is going to start making sense … Now.” (Amis 124) and that “The world, after all, here in Auschwitz has a new habit. It makes sense” (138). Whereas in other parts of the novel the narrator clearly indicates a distinction between him and the protagonist, he now announces himself as “I, Odilo Unverdorben” and states that “I was one now, fused for a preternatural purpose” (124). The reversal of chronology makes the narrator see the Holocaust and the concentration camps not as acts of destruction, but as acts of creation:

the narrator's point of view gets time wrong to make Odilo's crimes look right, to render the violent creation of a people easier than its brutal decimation. At
the expense of the intelligibility of everything else, the narratorial soul of Odilo has made sense of the Holocaust, reliteralizing Nazi eugenics as good birth, recasting genocide as genesis. (Menke 964)

This is clearly the case in the following passage, where the narrator describes his tasks at Auschwitz:

Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire.

I or a doctor of equivalent was present at every stage in the sequence. One did not need to know why the ovens were so ugly, so very ugly … Who would want to cook with an oven such as this … The patients, still dead, were delivered out on a stretcher-like apparatus. The air felt thick and warped with the magnetic heat of creation. Thence to the Chamber, where the bodies were stacked carefully and, in my view, counter-intuitively, with babies and children at the base of the pile, then the women and the elderly, and then the men … But it worked … Next the facade of the Sprinkleroom, the function of whose spouts and nozzles (and numbered seats and wardrobe tickets, and signs in six or seven languages) was merely to reassure and not, alas, to cleanse; and the garden path beyond …

 Entirely intelligibly, though, to prevent needless suffering, the dental work was usually completed while the patients were not yet alive. The kapos would go at it, crudely but effectively, with knives or chisels or any tool that came to hand. Most of the gold we used, of course, came direct from the Reichsbank. But every German present, even the humblest, gave willingly of his own store – I more than any other officer … (Amis 128-130)
This highly unusual perception does not come as a surprise, for “seen in reverse, the deextermination of the Jews, their dispersion out of concentration camps, is perfectly logical” (Kellman 345).

When looking at Time’s Arrow’s narrative structure in the previous section, I mentioned the important connection between the novel and the study of thermodynamics. When dealing with the novel’s backward understanding of the extermination of the Jews, this physical theory also bears great significance, for the novel “treats the Holocaust as a consummately thermodynamic event” (Menke 973):

Reducing entropy right and left, the thermodynamics of Auschwitz pieces together Jews and Gypsies out of scattered molecules of haze, sorts stashes of clothes and dental work, assembles perfect families out of a human chaos.

(973)

It is because of Amis’s radical reversal of time and thus of these thermodynamic laws that sense can be made of the Holocaust. This unusual perception of history is at the heart of Time’s Arrow:

It is a common refrain in both fiction and nonfiction that genocide defies reason and expression. Amis’ contribution to the vast literature of the Holocaust is the premise that when viewed backward it makes perfect sense.

(Kellman 345)

By illustrating that the message of Time’s Arrow is conveyed precisely because of the author’s conscious use of reverse chronology, I have attempted to prove that the story’s theme and its unconventional narrative structure are closely intertwined, allowing the structure to
become more than a mere formal experiment, and to establish itself as a meaningful and even essential contribution to the story.
3.2 The setup, the performance and The Prestige

3.2.1 Introduction

The Prestige, written by Christopher Priest in 1995, is the account of a bitter and deadly feud between two rivalling 19th-century stage illusionists. At the heart of their feud, characterized by obsessive secrecy and insatiable curiosity, is an illusion both men perform in the Victorian theatres, the effects of which are still being felt by their families a century later. Structured as an epistolary novel, The Prestige consists of different journals written by the story’s protagonists, i.e. magicians Alfred Borden and Rupert Angier, and their respective relatives Andrew Westley and Kate Angier.

This case study will deal with the thematic narrative structure found in The Prestige, as I will try to prove that the story developments mirror the three parts of a stage illusion, i.e. the setup, the performance, and the prestige (3.2.3). This analysis of the story’s plot construction will be preceded by a detailed summary (3.2.2).

3.2.2 Summary

As mentioned in the previous chapter, The Prestige is a multi-plot narrative that consists of a number of different journals by the story’s protagonists. Hence, this summary will be structured accordingly.
Part One: Andrew Westley

Andrew Westley, an English journalist, finds himself on a train heading for Derbyshire, where he is to follow up a report of an incident that occurred in a religious sect. Shortly before, an unknown woman sent him a book called Secret Methods of Magic, written by a certain Alfred Borden. Although the book itself is of little interest to him, he is intrigued by the author’s name. It turns out that Andrew was adopted, and that his original name was Nicholas Julius Borden. In spite of the fact that he is not interested in tracing his natural parents, there is one matter concerning his past that continues to obsess him: all his life, he has had the impression that he was born one of a pair of identical twins. This is manifested through what Andrew himself calls “the feeling that someone else is sharing my life” (Priest 4). He feels that he is somehow linked by an inexplicable, apparently psychic contact. However, Andrew has never been able to trace his supposed brother, nor has he found official records of any brothers or sisters, let alone a twin. The Bordens, it appears, only had one child, adding to the mystery of Andrew’s shared feelings.

He arrives at the Derbyshire village, where witnesses claimed they have seen a bilocation: the founder of the sect, Father Franklin, is said to have been seen present in the village, which is impossible, as he is an inmate of the California State Penitentiary. Even though Andrew will not investigate this incident any further, the bilocation is a reference to events that will occur later on in the novel. Andrew soon discovers that he was called to the town by a woman named Kate Angier, who lives near the sect. When he visits her, she tells him he has visited her house when he was still a young boy, before his adoption. She asks him about his twin brother, and proceeds by mentioning their great-grandfathers, Alfred Borden (it is revealed that it was Kate who sent Andrew the magic book) and Rupert Angier, who for years fought out a bitter feud, constantly attacking each other by interfering with the other’s
shows. This feud, Kate believes, may shed new light on what has happened to Andrew’s supposed twin brother. Fascinated, he decides to stay for the night, and the both of them start going through the archives of Rupert Angier, known on the stage as *The Great Danton*.

**Part Two: Alfred Borden**

The reader is now presented with the journal of Alfred Borden, also known as *Le Professeur de Magie*. It is the chronicle as found in the book that Andrew was given by Kate, written by Borden in retrospect. The author, who calls himself a master of illusions, is very self-conscious about not giving away too many trade secrets. The first few entries are about Alfred’s youth, narrating his growing interest in the art of magic. Before long, Borden becomes a notable stage illusionist. Considering himself a professional magician, he grows increasingly frustrated with so-called spiritists: charlatans who in exchange for money pretend they are capable of communicating with the deceased. He decides to attend such an interaction with the departed. During the séance, Borden, still young and impulsive, cannot take the fraudulent events any longer and accuses the spiritist of being an imposter, after which he is forcefully removed from the room. The spiritist, Borden learns, goes by the name of Rupert Angier. Angier, upon recognizing Borden, exclaims he will be following the latter’s career with the greatest attention. This is the start of a long feud between the two rivals, and for many years, Angier in his turn sabotages Borden’s magic tricks.

The attacks stop when Borden invents his famous act, *The Transported Man*, in which he moves from one cabinet downstage to a second cabinet upstage instantaneously. Meanwhile, Borden hires a female stage assistant by the name of Olive Wenscombe. Dissatisfied with the stage effect of his illusion and because Angier has developed a similar act, Borden decides to incorporate spectacular electrical effects (inspired by the work of inventor Nikola Tesla) into
his signature trick, now called *The New Transported Man. Le Professeur de Magie* is once again at the top of the Victorian magic scene. At the end of the century, Borden is shocked by the discovery that his assistant Olivia, with whom he has been having an affair, was sent by Angier to spy on him and reveal the secret behind his spectacular trick. However, Olivia has fallen in love with her new employer, and they devise a plan to provide Angier with false information, allowing Olivia to stay with Alfred. The plan works: Angier no longer attacks him and Borden’s career is in full bloom.

Several years later, Border finds his state of pleasant equilibrium once again disrupted. Angier has returned to the stage, performing an illusion the likes of which neither audience nor critics have ever seen. Borden decides to see Angier’s new act, called *In a Flash*, for himself, and is intrigued by his rival’s act: with the use of large electrical apparatus, Angier transports himself from the stage to one of the spectator boxes at the top floor of the theatre. Borden, jealous of Angier’s extraordinary illusion, stops at nothing to discover the secret behind it. Eventually, he manages to be chosen as a volunteer in one of Angier’s smaller tricks, and with the use of a disguise, he quickly find his way backstage. In the sub-stage area, he finds several electrical machines, and unaware of their function, he shuts them down. Angier’s whole act fails and when Borden tries to escape the scene, he encounters his rival, who seems to have taken on the form of an apparition. Borden exclaims it was all an accident, and runs away.

Several weeks after the incident, he learns that his long-time contender has died. Newspapers report that Rupert Angier has died of injuries sustained while performing his widely acclaimed illusion. Alfred Borden finds himself consumed by feelings of guilt. Nonetheless, he attempts to buy Angier’s magical equipment from the latter’s widow, but the attempt fails, and Borden realizes he will never know the workings behind the impressive illusion. At the end of the journal, Borden narrates a murder attempt by what he calls Angier’s ghost, who eventually spares him and leaves him paralysed with fear.
Throughout this entire part of the novel, the reader is given a clue as to what the workings are behind Borden’s *The New Transported Man*. At several points in the journal, the writer seems to engage in self-criticism, which sometimes even takes on the form of a discussion:

So, now we have spoken, it is agreed I may continue? Here it is again, on that understanding. I may write what I see fit, while I may add to it as I see fit. I planned nothing to which I would not agree, only to write a great deal more of it before I read it. I apologise if I think I was deceiving me, and meant no harm. (Priest 44)

This passage, as well as many others, alludes to the existence of a twin brother, used as a double in the stage illusion. This is also implied by the ghost of Angier, who asks: “Tell me, Borden! Which one of them are you? Which one?” (116).

### Part Three: Kate Angier

In this part, Kate Angier, a distant relative of *The Great Danton*, describes a horrible event that occurred when she was only a little girl. One day, her parents invite a certain Clive Borden to their estate, accompanied by his son Nicholas, in an attempt to patch up the feud between their respective ancestors. However, the conversation soon turns into a heated argument. The adults (and Nicholas, held by his father) rush off into the basement, where they find the apparatus used by Rupert Angier. Kate’s father turns on the electrical machine, and dares Clive Borden to enter it, insisting that this would provide him with the solution the Borden family has since long craved for. Infuriated by Borden’s refusal to enter the machine, Angier throws the young boy in. The boy is believed to be dead.
Many years later, she still insists on finding out what happened with Nicholas Borden that night, and she invites Andrew Westley:

I traced you, Andrew, because you and I are the key to the whole thing – you are the sole surviving Borden, while I am to all intents the last living Angier. Against all logic, I know Nicky Borden was you, Andrew, and that somehow you survived that ordeal. (Priest 146)

It seems that they are getting closer to finding out the truth, as Andrew exclaims that he has never experienced the presence of his brother as strong in him as he does when he is in the Angier estate: “My twin brother is somewhere here” (149).

**Part Four: Rupert Angier**

Similar to the second part, which consisted of Alfred Borden’s journal, this part of the novel is made up of diary entries by his adversary Rupert Angier. At a young age, Angier, son of the wealthy Lord Colderdale, grows a great interest in the craft of magic. Together with his wife Julia, Angier starts to perform simple tricks in front of small audiences, and they soon shift their activities to séances, in which the magician tricks the grieving clients into believing he is conversing with their deceased family members. During one of these séances, a fellow magician, Alfred Borden, disrupts his performance. In the incident, Borden pushes Angier’s wife to the floor. This has a disastrous consequence: Julia, expecting a child from her husband, is taken to the hospital, where she has a miscarriage and almost dies. For Angier, this is the start of a long and bitter feud.

Several years later, Angier has become a famous illusionist. During an act involving an underwater escape, Borden has sabotaged his adversary’s tying ropes and Angier barely survives. Meanwhile, Borden knows great success with *The New Transported Man*. When
Angier is approached by a journalist, Mr. Koenig, and asked whether he knows the secret behind the act, he replies that he is certain that the trick is performed using an identical twin brother. However, Koenig, having checked the facts, insists that Alfred Borden does not have a brother.

Angier leaves his wife, and starts an affair with his assistant Olivia Svenson. In the meantime, his rival continues to thwart him, growing bolder in his attacks. Angier, who for a while wanted the feud to surcease, swears revenge. He sends his assistant, under her maiden’s name of Olivia Wenscombe, to work for Borden, in an attempt to discover the secret behind his illusion so that Angier might once again outperform him. Times goes by, and Olivia returns, announcing she will leave him, having fallen in love with her new employer. However, she does hand him Borden’s secret. On the paper she gives him, Angier finds the name of Nicola Tesla.

Angier leaves for the United States, where he pays Tesla, a gifted inventor who claims he can transmit electricity through the air, to built him an apparatus capable of transporting living organisms. From Tesla’s reaction to his proposal, Angier gathers that Borden has not visited the inventor and that the latter had attempted to misdirect him through his former assistant and mistress. Angier returns to England, and after a long period of silence, Tesla sends him the completed machine, along with the proper instructions. Angier succesfully tries out the apparatus, and his stage illusion, In a Flash, soon becomes a tremendous success. Meanwhile, upon the return of Koenig the journalist, he learns that Alfred Borden’s act is in fact based on the use of identical twins, i.e. Frederick and Albert Borden. To ensure their secret, they have forged official records and obsessively ‘share one life’.

During one of Angier’s performances, one of the Borden brothers manages to sneak backstage and sabotage the apparatus designed by Tesla. As a result, Angier finds himself only partially transported, and due to illness, he is forced to cancel his upcoming shows. He eventually
stages his own death and continues to live in anonymity as Lord Colderdale, a title he had inherited from his father. Although his health continues to decline, comfort comes in the form of the acquisition of Borden’s notebook. This provides Angier with proof that he truly knows the secret behind _The New Transported Man_, i.e. that _Le Professeur de Magie_ uses his twin brother as a double. Furthermore, he learns that one of brothers has died, and that the remaining Borden has tried to conceal this death. Angier decides to publish the notebook as a final act of revenge on his long-time rival. Consumed by his poor shape, Angier (to the outside world known as Lord Colderdale) dies.

The final entries come as somewhat of a surprise. They are written by the almost ghost-like counterpart of Angier that came into life after the failed transportation during the last performance of _In a Flash_. It is this “doppelgänger” (Priest 302) who admits to having attempted to kill one of the Bordens, but did not go through with it because not even a feud like theirs can justify cold-blooded murder. It is also through these entries that we learn the macabre implications of Angier’s famous illusion: although the apparatus succeeds in transporting a human body by producing it elsewhere, it leaves the original body behind as well. This source body, which Angier calls the prestige material, is then disposed of after the show. The ghostly figure eventually moves in with Angier, and upon the latter’s death, wishes to transport itself one last time, into the corpse of its counterpart.

**Part Five: The Prestiges**

The final part of the novel narrates how Andrew Westley, destined to find his lost brother, descends into the old basement of the Angier estate. There, he too discovers the gruesome consequence of Angier’s stage illusions: the entire cave is filled with prestige materials, i.e. corpses of one and the same man. Among these corpses, he finds one smaller
body, which is marked Nicholas Borden. Upon taking the child in his arms, he notices a strong feeling of completion.

However, Andrew is not alone in the basement. Following him from the lurking shadows is the figure of Angier, who once more states the terrifying consequences of his apparatus and thus of his fame and desire to outdo his rival: “He is you, Borden, and these are all me” (Priest 358).

In the next section, I will investigate the narrative structure of The Prestige, which, as I will try to illustrate, is constructed according to the principles of a stage illusion.

3.2.3 Stage and story illusions

In The Prestige, the performance of stage illusions occupies a prominent place: it is the constant jealousy at each other’s tricks and ongoing attempts at devising an illusion that will trump the act of their rival that cause both magicians to engage in their bitter feud. In his journal, Alfred Borden describes the different parts of a stage illusion:

An illusion has three stages.

First there is the setup, in which the nature of what might be attempted is hinted at, or suggested, or explained. The apparatus is seen. Volunteers from the audience sometimes participate in the preparation. As the trick is being set up, the magician will make every possible use of misdirection.

The performance is where the magician’s lifetime of practice, and his innate skill as performer, conjoin to produce the magical display.
The third stage is sometimes called the effect, or the prestige, and this is the product of magic. If a rabbit is pulled from a hat, the rabbit, which apparently did not exist before the trick was performed, can be said to be the prestige of that trick. (Priest 64-65)

Upon reading *The Prestige*, it becomes clear that the author has consciously crafted story developments and turns in plot to model these three parts of a stage illusion.

The setup of the novel takes place in the phase prior to the highpoint of the feud between Borden and Angier. Both men are becoming skilful magicians, and occupy a respectable place on the Victorian stage.

The performance consists of the main part of the novel. It describes the bitter rivalry between both artists that springs from Borden’s tragic intervention during one of Angier’s séances:

A tragic accident spurs the fledgling illusionists into lifelong battle. In their ceaseless professional struggle for pre-eminence, the magicians over time begin to mirror each other, stealing tricks and repartee, lovers and lovely assistants, all the while attempting to create a stage illusion that will trump all that have come before. (Hand 27)

In their struggle for fame, both performers know a varying degree of success. The first to know great success is Borden, whose *The Transported Man* and *The New Transported Man* “caused a commotion of acclaim, ringing cash tills and fruitless speculation as to [his] secret” (Priest 71). This illusion, and the mystery of the secret behind it, infuriates his adversary Angier, who eventually sends his own assistant and mistress to infiltrate Borden’s workplace and discover the working of his act. Although provided with false information,
Angier nonetheless manages to copy and improve the illusion. *In a Flash* becomes a tremendous success and Angier is said to be “at the top of our profession” (91). Borden is reduced to a second-rate performer and is referred to as “a proponent of a style of magic remarkable more for its nostalgic value than its innovative flair” (92). Borden is unable to discover the workings of his rival’s illusion and eventually attempts to do so by means of trespassing backstage.

Although the spotlight shifts from Borden to Angier, both artists can be said to have known great success as stage performers. In the book sent to Andrew Westley, *Secret Methods of Magic*, Borden is mentioned as being “one of the greatest magicians who ever lived” (7):

> The author is Alfred Borden, inventor of the legendary illusion The New Transported Man. Borden, whose stage name was ‘Le Professeur de Magie’, was in the first decade of this century the leading stage illusionist. (7)

Rupert Angier, in his turn, has by the end of his life achieved a considerable measure of success, and was credited with inventing several notable stage illusions, among which *In a Flash*. Hence, despite being bitter rivals, both illusionists were widely popular among the Victorian music hall audience.

The prestige of the novel occurs when the reader becomes aware of the consequences the illusions and their secrets bring with them. Alfred Borden, in reality a joining of identical twins Albert and Frederick, pays a high price for obsessively protecting the secret behind *The New Transported Man*: both brothers are forced to share the same life, including being married to the same woman and having an affair with the same mistress. Both men are forced to engage in a comprehensive array of concealment, to the extent that they lose their sense of identity:
Whom did Sarah marry? Was it me, or was it me? I have two children, whom I adore. But are they mine to adore, really mine alone ... or are they actually mine? How will I ever know, except by the cravings of instinct? Come to that, with which of me did Olive fall in love, and with whom did she move into the flat in Hornsey? (Priest 115)

When the ghost of Angier threatens to kill Borden and asks him whom of the two brothers he really is, he is lost at words and exclaims: “I don’t know Angier! I no longer know myself!” (116). The author of the journal describes this as “the essential dilemma of my existence” (115). When one of the brothers dies and their secret is threatened to be exposed, the remaining Borden even goes so far as to buy his brother’s corpse from the morgue in order to deny the entire thing: being denied the right to pass away as the high point of persistently being denied the right to have a life of one’s own.

Angier too has to live with a terrible secret. Whereas the apparatus designed by Tesla is capable of reproducing the source body at any given location, the original body itself remains. As a consequence, after each performance of In a Flash, Angier has to dispose of a clone of himself. After Borden’s intervention and the resulting partial performance of the illusion, Angier is left with two insubstantial clones of himself, neither capable of truly living.

In spite of their success, both Borden and Angier are forced to live with the terrible implications of their obsessive secrecy and extreme desire to out-do each other. Performing seemingly fantastic illusions, the prestige behind them is of a gruesome nature.

From the paragraphs above it should be sufficiently clear that Christopher Priest has consciously crafted the plot developments of The Prestige to mirror the three acts of a stage illusion. As a result, the novel itself becomes an illusion, only with a prestige effect that does not inspire marvel, but dismay.
3.3 The chess game in Through the Looking-Glass

3.3.1 Introduction

In 1865, Lewis Carroll published Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, a twisted and absurd masterpiece that has since become a classic, proving to entertain readers of all ages (Tait 25). Six years later, in 1871, Carroll finished the sequel to this first Alice novel. Just like the previous book, Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There\(^2\) was intended as a fantasy story for children, written in dedication of the young Alice Liddell. But, also like the original Alice story, the author wanted to include something for his adult readers as well. Hence, the mad world behind the mirror is much like the underground world in the first book, containing a wide range of hilarious characters, clever dialogues and witty word play. In addition to this, Carroll, who in real life was a mathematician at Oxford by the name of Charles Ludwidge Dodgson (Harmon 98), also provided the story with a truly challenging structure, i.e. the solution to a chess problem.

The first section of this case study consists of a summary of the novel (3.3.2), followed by a move-by-move overview of the chess game played out in the story, illustrating that the actions and events taking place are directly influenced by the chess-inspired (and therefore thematic) narrative structure (3.3.3). Finally, I will attempt to prove that the use of the chess game as a plot-structuring device is essential to gain a full understanding of the story’s theme (3.3.4).

\(^2\) For reasons of brevity, I will from this point on refer to this novel as Through the Looking-Glass, omitting the second part of the title.
3.3.2 Summary

Alice sits in her armchair at home, drowsily watching her pet kitten, Kitty, as she unravels a ball of string. She snatches Kitty up and begins telling her about “Looking-Glass House,” an imaginary world on the other side of the mirror where everything is backward. Alice suddenly finds herself on the mantelpiece and steps through the mirror into this Looking-Glass House. On the other side of the mirror, Alice discovers a room similar to her own but with several strange differences. The chessmen stand in the fireplace in pairs, oblivious to Alice's presence. She comes to the aid of the White Queen's daughter, Lily, but realizes that the chess pieces cannot see her. After reading a strange poem (the notorious tale of the “Jabberwocky”), she sets off to explore the rest of the house.

Alice leaves the house and spots a beautiful garden in the distance, but every time she tries to follow the path to the garden she finds herself back at the door to the house. Confused, she wonders aloud how to get to the garden, and to her surprise a tiger lily responds. Other flowers join to the conversation, and several of them start to insult Alice. She learns from the flowers that the Red Queen is nearby, and sets off to meet her. Alice meets the Red Queen, and the two engage in conversation, but the Red Queen constantly corrects Alice's etiquette. She looks out over a field, sees a great game of chess in progress, and tells the Red Queen that she would like to join it. The Red Queen tells Alice she can stand in as a White Pawn and marks a course for her, explaining that when she reaches the end of the game, she will become a Queen herself.

Alice inexplicably finds herself on a train with a Goat, a Beetle, and a man dressed in white paper. They each nag Alice until the train eventually lurches to a halt. She finds herself
in a forest, conversing with a chicken sized Gnat, who tells her about the different insects of Looking-Glass World. After learning the names of the insects, Alice sets off again and discovers that she has forgotten the names of things, even her own name. She comes across a Fawn, who has also forgotten the names of things, and the two press on through the forest.

When Alice and the Fawn emerge from the forest, their memories of names come back, and the Fawn runs away in fear of Alice. Alice soldiers on alone until she meets Tweedledum and Tweedledee, an identical pair of heavyset men. The twins ignore Alice's repeated requests for directions and recite a poem instead. They notice the Red King sleeping nearby and explain to her that she exists only as a figment of the Red King's dream. Upset at first, Alice decides that the two of them speak nonsense. A fight spontaneously erupts between Tweedledum and Tweedledee over a broken rattle. A giant crow swoops down and interrupts the fight, sending the both of them running.

Alice slips away and encounters the White Queen, who explains that time moves backward in Looking-Glass World. As they speak, the White Queen plasters her finger, then screams in pain, and finally pricks her finger on a brooch. After explaining to Alice that she used to practice the impossible daily, she transforms into a sheep in a shop. The Sheep asks a disoriented Alice what she would like to buy. Though the shop is full of curious things, Alice finds that she cannot fix her eye on any one thing. The Sheep asks Alice if she knows how to row. Before she knows it, Alice finds herself in a boat with the Sheep, rowing down a stream. The boat crashes into something and sends Alice tumbling to the ground. When she stands up, she finds herself back in the shop. She purchases an egg from the Sheep, who places it on a shelf. Alice reaches for the egg and finds herself back in the forest, where the egg has transformed into Humpty Dumpty.
Humpty Dumpty sits on a wall and criticizes Alice for having a name that does not mean anything, explaining that all names should mean something. Humpty Dumpty treats Alice rudely, boasting that he can change the meanings of words at will. As soon as Alice learns this, she asks Humpty Dumpty to explain the words of the nonsense poem “Jabberwocky” to her. He defines the words of the first stanza and then recites a portion of his own poem. He abruptly bids her goodbye, and Alice storms off, annoyed. All of a sudden, a loud crash shakes the forest and she watches soldiers and horsemen run by.

Alice comes across the White King, who explains to her that he has sent all of his horses and men, presumably to put the shattered Humpty Dumpty back together again. The King's messenger Haigha approaches and informs them that the Lion and the Unicorn are engaging in battle in the town. Alice sets out with her new companions toward the town to watch the battle. They catch up with another of the King's messengers, Hatta, who explains the events of the fight thus far. The Lion and Unicorn stop battling and the White King calls for refreshments to be served. The White King tells Alice to cut the cake, but she finds that every time she slices the cake the pieces fuse back together. The Unicorn instructs Alice that Looking-glass cakes must be passed around first before they are sliced. Alice distributes the cake, but before they begin eating, a great noise interrupts, and when Alice looks up, she finds herself alone again.

The Red Knight gallops up to Alice and takes her as a prisoner. The White Knight arrives at Alice's side and vanquishes the Red Knight. Alice and the White Knight walk and talk together, and Alice finds a friend in the eccentric chessman. He promises to bring her safely to the last square where she will become a queen. As they walk, he tells her about all of
his inventions before sending her off with a song. She crosses the final brook and finds herself sitting on the bank with a crown on her head.

Alice finds herself in the company of the Red Queen and the White Queen, who question her relentlessly before falling asleep in her lap. The sound of their snoring resembles music. The sound is so distracting that Alice does not notice when the two Queens disappear. Alice discovers a castle with a huge door marked “Queen Alice.” Alice goes through the door and finds a huge banquet in her honour. She sits and wants to start eating, but the party quickly devolves into total chaos. Overwhelmed, Alice pulls away the tablecloth and grabs the Red Queen.

Alice wakes up from her dream to find herself holding Kitty. She wonders aloud whether or not her adventures were her own dream or the dream of the Red King.

In the next section, I will discuss the incorporation of the chess game in *Through the Looking-Glass*, proving that it is not merely a motif, but that it is responsible for structuring the novel’s plot, as will become clear when the events mentioned in the above summary are translated into chess moves.

### 3.3.3 The chessboard landscape: Alice and the chess pawns

As mentioned in the introduction, the chess game is key in the narrative scheme of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Although chess was already a recurring motif in medieval and
Renaissance literature (Downey 16-20), Carroll’s use of it in *Through the Looking-Glass* was truly innovative:

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance chess games were sometimes played with human pieces on enormous fields …, but I know of no earlier attempt than Carroll’s to base a fictional narrative on animated chess pieces. (Carroll 139)

This “dovetailing” of a chess game with an amusing “nonsense fable” (138) is not without challenges, as Carroll himself was aware of, and made clear in the preface to the 1897 edition:

As the chess-problem, given on the previous page, has puzzled some of my readers, it may be well to explain that it is correctly worked out, so far as the *moves* are concerned. The *alternation* of Red and White is perhaps not so strictly observed as it might be, and the “castling” of the three Queens is merely a way of saying that they entered the palace: but the “check” of the White King at move 6, the capture of the Red Knight at move 7, and the final “checkmate” of the Red King, will be found, by any one who will take the trouble to set the pieces and play the moves as directed, to be strictly in accordance with the laws of the game. (137)

Soon after Carroll’s publication of *Through the Looking-Glass*, many chess enthusiasts complained about the incoherence of the chess game. More specifically, they criticized “the lack of alternating turns between the two sides” and “the apparent discordance among the movements of the various pieces” (Downey 127). However, this sort of reductive criticism, although justified from a strictly chess-oriented point of view, does not take into account several important observations.

Firstly, such criticism fails to recognize that Carroll’s manipulation of the traditional rules of the chess game was “crucial to the point he was trying to make about Victorian society and the place of little girls, like Alice, within it” (128). Hence, it perceives the author’s “inability
to incorporate a traditional chess game into his novel as evidence of some sort of artistic failure” (128), whereas in fact the use of a normal chess game would have undermined the important thematic implications (128), which I will elaborate in the next section.

Secondly, it fails to recognize Carroll’s penchant for manipulating ordered systems (128). Thirdly, such reductive criticism does not understand that “the mad quality of the chess game conforms to the mad logic of the looking-glass world” (Carroll 140).

Lastly, it is not correct to accuse Carroll of inferior knowledge of the rules of chess, since three chess books were found in Carroll’s study after his death: George Walker’s Art of Chess-Play: A New Treatise on the Game of Chess, and two books by Howard Staunton, entitled The Chess Tournament, A Collection of the Games Played at this Celebrated Assemblage and The Chess-Player’s Companion: Comprising a New Treatise on Odds, and a Collection of Games (Fisher 88). Moreover, critic Ivor Davies states that “the curiosities in the chess game, such as the lack of strict alternation of turns and the leaving of the White King in check, can easily be accounted for by examining certain defunct rules that Walker and Staunton discuss in their texts” (qtd. in Downey 132).

Therefore, whereas chess enthusiasts may complain about the careless game both sides play, the fact remains that Carroll does a remarkable job at underlying the book’s actions with a correct sequence of chess moves. Hence, no attempts will be made in this dissertation to work out a better sequence of moves, but I will simply study the consequences of the chess game for the story’s narrative, i.e. how Alice’s movements and actions in the mirror world are determined by her place on the giant chessboard.

Before examining these consequences of the chess game for the course of the narrated events, it should be noted that the novel contains numerous allusions to chess (apart from the
presence of the Red and White\textsuperscript{3} pawns and pieces). For instance, in the first chapter, Alice is found talking to one of her kittens, directly mentioning the game of chess: “Kitty, can you play chess? Now, don’t smile, my dear, I’m asking it seriously. Because, when we were playing just now, you watched just as if you understood it: and when I said ‘Check!’ you purred!” (Carroll 146-147).

Another example of an allusion to chess can found in that same opening chapter: when the White King falls flat on his back, he is deeply shaken and turns cold to the very ends of his “whiskers.” This is a reference to the act in which the defeated chess player turns his king flat on its back. After this incident, the King exclaims he shall never forget the horror of that moment, upon which the Queen replies that he will, unless he makes a memorandum of it. This might be an allusion to the practice of recording chess moves (153-155).

As should become sufficiently clear from the examples above, the chess motif is prominent in the entire novel, “far more than the playing card and croquet motifs in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” (Fisher 86). In what follows, I will argue that Carroll goes even further, by not only making the game of chess a literary motif, but a plot-structuring device as well.

Already in the preface, Carroll himself hints at the importance of the game of chess, by including a diagram of a particular chess problem, which “shows the position of the chessmen before the commencement of the game” (Downey 123). This diagram can be found below (fig. 1).

Accompanying this diagram, a problem is posed: “White Pawn (Alice) to play, and win in eleven moves” (Carroll 136). This already points to the importance of chess to the development of the plot, which I will elaborate in the rest of this section.

\textsuperscript{3} The pieces in Through the Looking-Glass are White and Red, rather than the traditional Black and White, as Carroll wanted to avoid the traditional opposition between Good and Evil that was often present in medieval and Renaissance chess allegories (Downey 29).
In order to provide a clear overview of the chess moves in *Through the Looking-Glass*, I will employ the commonly used system of algebraic notation to record the moves of the pawns and pieces of the looking-glass world. In this system, the vertical files of the chessboard are designated “a” through “h” and the horizontal ranks are numbered “1” through “8”. If we apply this system to the diagram included by Carroll himself, we find that the White Queen is on square c1; the White Rook is on f1; Alice starts the game on square d2, next to the Red Queen, who is on e2; the Red King is on e4; the White Knight on f5; the White King resides on the c6 square; and finally, the Red Knight is on square g8. In Carroll’s fantasy world behind the looking-glass, these divisions between the chessboard checkers are represented by elements of nature: “the rows of the giant chessboard are separated from each other by brooks” and “the columns are divided by hedges” (Carroll 138). Below is a brief overview⁴ of the move-by-move⁵ progression of the chess game played out in *Through the Looking-Glass*:

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⁴ The third chapter of *The Truth about Pawn Promotion: The Development of the Chess Motif in Victorian Fiction* by Glen Robert Downey features a more detailed account of all the moves performed in *Through the Looking-Glass*, including an in-depth discussion about the purpose of and alternatives to each move.

⁵ In this article, Downey also points to the fact that “not all of these moves represent physical movement across the chessboard that conform to the established rules of orthodox chess” (123), i.e. moves 1, 5, 17 and 19.
(1) Alice meets the Red Queen (on squares d2 and e2 respectively)

(2) The Red Queen’s retreat (from e2 to h5)

(3) Alice’s journey through d3 to d4, where she encounters Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and the sleeping Red King (who is on e4)

(4) White Queen chases after her shawl (c1 to c4)

(5) Alice meets the White Queen (on squares d4 and c4 respectively)

(6) The White Queen continues her chase (c4 to c5)

(7) Alice crosses the brook to the Fifth Square (d4 to d5), where she meets the White Queen again (now a dressed as a sheep) in a shop

(8) White Queen (in sheep’s clothing) moves (c5 to f8)

(9) Alice crosses over to the Sixth Square (d5 to d6), where she encounters Humpty Dumpty

(10) White Queen moves (f8 to c8)

(11) Alice travels to the forests of the Seventh Square (d6 to d7)

(12) The Red Knight moves (g8 to e7), threatening to take Alice as his prisoner

(13) The White Knight takes the Red Knight (on the e7 square)

(14) The White Knight escorts Alice to the border of the Eight Square and then retreats (e7 to f5)

(15) Alice reaches the Eight Square (d7 to d8)

(16) Red Queen joins her (h5 to e8); Alice now finds herself in between both Queens and is examined

(17) Alice becomes a Queen herself

(18) The Queens enter the palace (“castle”)

(19) Alice enters the castle and feasts

(20) White Queen disappears into the soup (f8 to a6)
(21) Alice captures the Red Queen and checkmates the Red King (on square e8), a move which allows her to win the game.

From the above overview it becomes clear that all movements (including Alice’s) are restricted by the strict rules of the chess game. Because of this, it is clearly the thematic narrative structure of the chess game that shapes the story’s course of events: the novel “not only incorporates the game but structures its plot on the solution to an unorthodox chess problem” (Downey iii). Hence, the chess game becomes more than a motif and the employed structure more than a formal challenge. The chess-inspired structure becomes essential to the story. Firstly, it determines the characters’ locations and actions: “It is impossible, in the space of the game, to be an autonomous individual: each one involves all the others and is simultaneously involved” (Cixous 242). Secondly, the structure also provides the story with a goal, i.e. the solution to a chess problem. To put it in Alice’s own words, the whole novel is “a great huge game of chess that’s being played” (Carroll 172).

Whereas in this section I have attempted to illustrate that Carroll has successfully integrated the chess motif in *Through the Looking-Glass*, in the last section I will try to prove that this incorporation of a solution to a chess problem as a plot-structuring device is of crucial importance to the story’s theme, i.e. a girl’s progress towards womanhood.

### 3.3.4 Becoming a Queen: implications of being a pawn

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, the reader follows young Alice as she enters the looking-glass world. When she comes to understand that Lily, one of the white pawns, is too young to play, Alice agrees to assume her role and participate in the game of chess:
“… How I wish I was one of them! I wouldn’t mind being a Pawn, if only I might join—though of course I should like to be a Queen, best.”

She glanced rather shyly at the real Queen as she said this, but her companion only smiled pleasantly, and said “That’s easily managed. You can be the White Queen’s Pawn, if you like, as Lily’s too young to play; and you’re in the Second Square to begin with: when you get to the Eight Square you’ll be a Queen--” (Carroll 172-173)

It soon becomes apparent that Alice’s chess adventure is of a symbolic nature: in fact, the reader witnesses her journey from innocence to experience (Downey 130). The game of chess is used as a metaphor in chronicling the experiences of Alice as she endures the trials of becoming an adult (3). This clearly exposes the strong link between the story’s theme and structure: the goal of the chess game (reaching the Eighth Square) is the same as the goal that the theme implies (becoming a queen and thus a woman).

As Alice starts “her journey towards queenhood and the coming of age it symbolizes,” she soon realizes “what it is like when her hopes and expectations of what has been promised her are seriously undermined” (Downey 130). This realization is already hinted at by several implications of participating in a game of chess. At the beginning of the game, Alice accepts the role of a pawn. She makes this decision not only because a pawn can eventually promote to a queen, but also because “the value of this piece in the game is equivalent to her social position on the other side of the Looking-Glass” (143). In the opening chapter, the reader is given a clear insight into this social position and the relationship between Alice and her authoritative environment. Alice is playing with her kitten and “acting out a reversal of the traditional role she assumes in the Victorian domestic power structure” (144). She is scolding the kitten, which is unable to respond to the charges brought by the girl. This symbolizes
“Alice’s own powerlessness in her desire for self-directed action” (144). Hence from the start, Alice’s role as plaything already implies a position of inferior responsibility. Another foreboding of the eventual disappointment resulting from the fact that Alice is a pawn, deals with a limitation in awareness. Whereas chess players, or readers in this case, are allowed to peer over the entire playing field, seeing the positions of the various pieces, the pawns themselves do not have this overview. They only have a very limited awareness of the nature of the events in which they are participating (137). As the looking-glass world and the ongoing chess game in *Through the Looking-Glass* are symbolic for Victorian society, Alice will soon learn that she is only a pawn, a playing piece with a narrow scope and limited awareness:

Alice’s failure to find the social power she is looking for … is in some sense a product of how the community of chess pieces defines her potential to do so with the Looking-Glass society, just as the roles of Victorian girls and women were defined by the patriarchal society in which they lived. (139)

This limitation is alluded to by Carroll in the episode in the Shop (in the fifth chapter): “You may look in front of you, and on both sides, if you like,” said the Sheep; “but you ca’n’t [sic] look *all* around you – unless you’ve got eyes at the back of your head” (Carroll 211).

A third implication of Alice being a pawn that also indicates that the ending will not be a fulfilling experience, is the fact that she is “consistently deprived of making important choices in bringing the game to an end” (Downey 141). Her path is fixed, i.e. progression towards promotion, and her goal is clear: to checkmate the sleeping Red King once she has undergone this promotion and has become a queen (141). This too has a grim influence on Alice’s personal development:

This fundamental inability to make a conscious choice in determining a particular course of events not only deprives her of making important decisions
about where she stands in the game, it further prevents her from fully comprehending the nature of her experiences. (150)

A fourth and last implication of Alice’s role of a chess piece is the inability of a pawn to return to squares from which it has come, which causes her “to move forward into the trials of adolescence and adulthood without a chance to return to those happy Summer Days that inspire her first adventures in Wonderland” (150). Although she would very much prefer this, going back is prevented by her position as a pawn.

As should become clear from the above arguments, assuming the role of a chess piece has several important implications for Alice and the course of her adventure, which is a direct result of the choice made by the author to employ “a chess problem and its detailed solution as the structural basis for the plot” of his novel (125).

The theme of becoming an adult, and more importantly the eventual disappointment caused by the highly restricted responsibility this brings, is also hinted at in various episodes of the novel. For instance, in the fourth chapter, Tweedledum and Tweedledee tell Alice the story of “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” in which a group of oysters find their doom because they put their trust in the rhetorical words of the Walrus. In this story, the Walrus states:

‘It seems a shame,’ the Walrus said,
‘To play them such a trick.
After we’ve brought them out so far,
And made them trot so quick!’ (Carroll 195)

The parallel with Alice’s own journey towards the Eighth Square is striking. She too believed the words of the charismatic Red Queen, who promised her that “in the Eighth Square we shall be Queens together, and it’s all feasting and fun!” (176). The story about the sad fate of the oysters seems to serve as a warning to Alice that the purpose she was given by the Red
Queen is meant to be misleading and that her desire for power will ultimately cause disappointment. Another incident that foreshadows Alice’s eventual disillusionment can be found in the fifth chapter, which describes Alice’s encounter with the Sheep in the Shop, where she cannot manage to select something to buy:

The shop seemed full of all manner of curious things – but the oddest part of it all was that, whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold. (211)

This episode clearly illustrates Alice’s inability to make conscious decisions. This inability also becomes strikingly clear from the scene with Humpty Dumpty (in the following chapter), where she is forced to play along with his nonsense games. This episode too is a clear foreboding of the acute sense of disappointment Alice’s promotion will bring, as Downey notes:

Humpty Dumpty’s highly "unsatisfactory" treatment of Alice mirrors her treatment by the two Queens once she has reached the Eighth Square. Whenever it suits him, Humpty Dumpty simply switches games and Alice is forced to keep up with him in precisely the same manner that she physically struggles to keep up with the swift-footed Queens when still a pawn, and intellectually struggles to overcome their Looking-Glass logic puzzles when they begin administering their examinations. (197)

Also important is the fact that, just like in the solution to the chess problem, Alice cannot do anything to change what will happen: although she is familiar with the nursery rhyme, in which “Humpty Dumpty had a great fall” (Carroll 219), she is unable to prevent him from tumbling down the wall. Humpty Dumpty’s fate is sealed, as is Alice’s.
A final example that clearly shows how powerless Alice really is, can be found in the ninth chapter. This chapter describes the coronation feast, where she is not allowed to have any dinner at all, and is unable to make decisions of her own, even after she has been promoted to be a queen.

From the examples above, it should be sufficiently clear that the message conveyed by *Through the Looking-Glass* is not an optimistic one. It leaves the reader with Alice’s eventual realisation that, contrary to her initial belief that becoming a queen would lead the way to autonomy, the powers she has been awarded only cause her to see how trapped she is within the game, where choices cannot be made freely (Downey 33):

Alice’s symbolic journey from innocence to experience sees her ultimately frustrated by the reality that her new position does not bring with it the social power she had imagined, but only the realization that such power is a fleeting dream. (140)

It seems that Alice’s path towards queenhood, which as a pawn she is predetermined to follow, only leads to disappointment. Although chess is the guiding force in shaping her adventure, it is also responsible for imposing strict rules on her every move. Therefore, the chess game is of great importance, not only structurally, but also because it serves to reveal the novel’s grim message, i.e. that Alice is trapped “within a game in which Victorian society designates [her] as [a] player of only secondary importance” (ii). She is “ultimately a prisoner of her inability to change the game in which she finds herself” (11).
4. Conclusion

As I have tried to prove in this dissertation, certain authors of modern English prose have distanced themselves from traditional plot constructions. As an alternative, these authors consciously use thematic elements present in their novels as story-structuring devices, incorporating principles of modernist writing such as complex chronology and multi-plot narratives. In this dissertation, I have analysed three novels that are highly characterized by this intertwining of theme and structure:

- Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* uses reverse chronology to illustrate that only through a reversal of time, sense can be made of the horror of the Holocaust, and that time can serve as a fruitful form of retrospective therapy.

- in *The Prestige*, author Christopher Priest has consciously crafted plot developments to mirror the three parts of a stage illusion, i.e. the setup, the performance and the prestige.

- Lewis Carroll has successfully included a chess problem and its solution as the structural basis for the plot of *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, in which Alice’s powerless and fixed role as a pawn serves to illustrate that the process of growing up ultimately leads to disappointment.

Hence, these novels serve as excellent illustrations of the use of thematic narrative structures, which can be regarded as being unconventional in modern English prose.
5. Works Cited


