# CONSIDERING AN INTRATEXTUAL INVESTIGATION OF PHILIP ROTH'S MOST FAMOUS SERIES OF BOOKS

**Corina Alexandrina PUŞCAŞ**[1]

*Abstract*

Several times in his career Roth has undertaken to write linked novels, therefore, this study focuses on one possible method of reading Roth's series of novels for unity, in order to reach a pattern, a coherence, an overarching meaning, a wholeness and neatness in the design of each of the books which make up these series - this method is called *intratextuality*. First, I will define the concept of *intratextuality*, then I will describe the range of textual features it entails, furthermore, I will shift my focus to the way these textual features responsible for *intratextuality* contribute to the multilayered communications between authors of narratives and their audiences, and, finally, I will show how Roth's most famous series of books (the Zuckerman books) can be read *intratextually*.

**Keywords: intratextuality, linked novels, reading for unity, Philip Roth, the Zuckerman project**

**1. Theoretical considerations.** If the very vast majority of the critical projects on Philip Roth's several series of books are concerned with chunks of text (every book in itself), which systematically break these off into even smaller pieces, with the intention to achieve the compartmentalization so necessary for a thorough understanding and appreciation of the richness of the texts, this study focuses on how to put things together, how to adopt the large perspective, oblivious to most details, and how to read Roth's series for unity, i.e. reading them univocally. This is in my opinion the most natural type of reading, the one which involves the movement or drive towards some sort of unity, because that is how we make sense of things. The commonly used technique of chopping up the text in order to use it (a process specific to professional readers) needs to be completed by reversing the process with the aim to reach a wholeness and neatness in the design of the an author's books which make up series. It is the process Rabinowitz describes as "setting out the basic coherence of literary works, their 'unity' or 'basic pattern' or 'overarching meaning"'141).

There are two literary axes along which critics want to assess coherence (the objectivists' axis and subjectivists' one, i.e. the formalists' and reader critics'): on the one hand, they want to evaluate the formal relation among elements of a book (coherence as a textual property), on the other, they want to view coherence as a quality of the vision of the writer or of the world he describes (making coherent as a critical activity). Indeed, recent reader criticism is making increasingly clear that when critics discuss coherence, their true subject is less a quality in the text or the author than an activity on the part of the readers. Susan Horton highlights literary critics most important role in this matter,

[1] Assitent. PhD., *Petru Maior* University, Târgu-Mureş



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when she calls "the critic's rage to pattern" (40). Culler similarly claims that the unity of texts "is produced not so much by intrinsic features of their parts as by the intent at totality of the interpretive process: the strength of the expectations which lead readers to look for certain forms of organization in a text and to find them" (91). Similarly, in *The Act of Reading,* esp. 118-25, Wolfgang Iser conceives of the reading act as a activity pointed at "consistency-building".

This approach implies working with the concept of *intratextuality*. Researching the concept has revealed it is new and largely undealt with in most critical debates. In what follows, a minimal theoretical framework is described: a definition, a set of characteristics and number of sub-concepts all in agreement with the tenets of the rhetorical approach to narrative all based on structuralist and post-structuralist views on this matter and on Rabinowitz's guidelines in his *Before Reading*.

**2. Definition, principles and concepts.**

Viewed from a formal perspective, the notion of *intratextuality* in a series of different and autonomous books by the same author is connected to the text's design to provide unity. It is an internal system of connections and references placed in the text in order to help readers decode particular courses of actions, circumstances, attitudes etc. and highlight architectural design of the entire series. The rhetorical perspective, on the other hand, means recuperating unity, the concept of *intratextuality* being directly tied to the concepts of authorial audience and authorial intention, in other words, to the reader's attempt to read and understand the whole as the author intended by wittingly joining a particular interpretive community, to the acceptance of the author's invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers.

*Intratextuality* is a relatively newly-defined critical tool/analytical category, barely tackled by literary critics. However, *intratextuality* makes no claims to being fundamentally new, since clearly questions of this nature have been asked since antiquity. *Intratextuality* is a term which seems to have been recently coined independently by a number of critics and theorists (as Alison Sharrock[2] points out in her introduction to *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations*) on the analogy of *intertextuality*, to refer to internal relationships within a text. Thus while *intertextuality* defines the relationship between different texts (links to other texts), *intratextuality* defines the relationship between the parts of one specific text, more precisely the internal tensions and linkages between components of a whole, which may be one text or a series of texts (characterized by the same authorial signature).

[2] The term´intratextuality´ that Sharrock thought to have coined herself she later discoved it used in a number of places: Frangoulidis (1997a), Kolarov (1992), Orr (1991), boyle (1993), John Henderson, via Pucci (1998), who quotes Perri (1978). Used extensively in Reid(1992), under the heading of `framing`(his definition of intratextual framing starts from the physical paragraph of the printed book, and moves to embedded narrative; Reid – formalist interests). Grigley`s (1995) book on art, text and theory ends with a chapter entitled Ìntratextuality`. However, these theorist all have slightly different conceptions one from the other.



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In a review by Ellen Oliensis of *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations* we find the combined definition of *intratextuality* given by the editors: "This is a definition grounded in form, '*intratextuality*' as a practice of textual segmentation and recombination: ´part-ing,´ as Sharrock puts it (11); 'a property of texts where the internal design, structure, and partition of the text are particularly paraded,' in Morales' words (326). One paradigmatic strategy of *intratextual* reading is to consider the contribution of seemingly wayward parts (digressions, purple patches, etc.) to the ´wholes´ from which they diverge; one key issue, especially for Sharrock, is the possibility of resisting this movement toward totalization, of granting the parts some measure of autonomy" (30).

*Intratextuality* is characterized by conceptual bagginess. It refers to the relation of literary parts to the literary whole that leads to a well formed plot, but it can also be used of any relationship within a text, for example the imagistic and thematic structures of coherence and continuity beloved to the new critical and structuralist traditions, and the relationships of discontinuity highlighted by post-structuralist reading practices.

### 3. Intratextuality, as a strategy of recuperating unity - the rhetorical point of view.

When we read, by the very act of reading, we are driven towards some sort of ´unity`. It is a very common critical move to argue for unity, and find reasons why apparently divergent passages are really contributing to the whole. Contemporary literature with its particularities and diversity makes the vast majority of reading strategies to involve some form of the following two approaches: either to celebrate (or deprecate) disunity, whether or not by denying the significance of the parts to each other, or to argue that it must all really be unified. Both are forms of unity in diversity. However, most theorists are more inclined to take the second one.

Reading encourages us to conceptualize texts as units within boundaries. The physical book, the act of performance, the title, the prologue, the `sense of ending`, even the practice of excerption: all these things contribute towards creating a sense of (a) text. *Intratextual* parts, text and criticism are all one (to use the metaphor of wholeness) – not a seamless whole all nicely congruent, but rather a dynamic tension or a series of tensions all ultimately linked in the act of reading (Sharrock 24-26).

### 4. Aspects specific to *intratextuality*.

First, *intratextuality* implies that among the potential (infinite) range of assumptions an author can make are the ones that their readers have knowledge of the previous book(s) in the series and that his readers are constituted in an interpretive community around this knowledge of the series of books. *Intratextuality* entails one major advantage and one disadvantage with respect to the author. The advantage is: no necessity to explain again. Roth does not take the trouble to explain at all who Zuckerman, Kepesh or Roth is, his background and his personality. He assumes that the readers in already familiar with this knowledge. He seems very comfortable with this decision not to remind



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readers, feeling based on his assumptions connected with *intratextuality,* which range from the recurrence of characters, settings, themes to technique and style. The significant limitation entailed by this assumption and signaled by Rabinowitz and Mary Pratt is that once a writer has undertaken to write linked novels, they have to give up some of their freedom. Specifically, once Roth has made certain initial decisions, whatever he wishes to communicate—even when he wishes to communicate ambiguity, as it happens in *The Counterlife*—, he has limited the range of subsequent choices. On the other hand, because intratextuality places a greater weight on the role of the audience or reader in constructing relationships, as it entails operating with some version of a reader-response criticism and there is a loosening of authorial control, both this advantage and this limitation concern the reader to the same extent. The communication is efficient, without boring repetitions, but for an accurate decoding/evaluation the reader is bound to have already read what happened before.

Secondly, in her chapter in *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations*, Alison Sharrock shows that *intratextuality* implies a number of aspects regarding the relationship between parts and wholes. Thus, *intratextuality* entails emphasis on the interaction of detail and big picture. Both authors and readers keep thinking how parts interrelate with the wholes. Reading *intratextually* means "looking at the text from different directions backwards as well as forwards, chopping it up in various ways, building it up again, contracting and expanding its boundaries both within the opus and outside, dividing and rejoining in the act of reading" (7).

Sharrock also shows that *intratextuality* seeks to put the relationship between parts more firmly on the critical map, and so to offer by example a more explicitly self-conscious ´perspective´ on the contribution of internal textual relationship to the reading of the whole. She puts forward the hypothesis of intratextuality that "a text´s meaning grows not only out the readings of its parts and its whole, but also out of readings of the relationships between parts, and the reading of those parts as parts, and parts as relationship (interactive and rebarbative): all this both formally (e.g. episodes, digression, frame, narrative line, etc.) and substantively (e.g. in voice, theme, allusion, topos, etc.) – and teleologically" (7-8).

An important element in intratextuality is the fact that sometimes parts do not relate to each other in tidy and significant ways, but stick out like sore thumbs. "Intratextuality is about how bits need to be read in the light of other bits, but it is also about the bittiness of literature, its uncomfortable squareness-in-round-(w)holeness" (Sharrock 9). Therefore, when one is more concerned with dwelling explicitly on how texts are put together, one has to deal with those elements which pull texts apart. These are a number of ´formal´issues of textuality, such as digressions and narrative line faults, and they must necessarily be considered as part of the intratextual strategy.

Thus, critics have to draw attention to the self-advertising bumpiness of narrative "digressions". In his essay included in *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations,* Richard Martin shows the necessity to reclaim `contradictions, repetitions, digressions



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and other anomalies` as creative sites of meaning. Martin´s intratextual strategy highlights the rhetorical power of a textuality not subject to ´the tyranny of Aristotle´s Poetics´. He stresses the value of textual material that – by canonical standards - does not fit very well (in tone, content, size, and detail) with other textual elements. These elements (their contextualization, in fact) release particular political and narratological meanings. Fractures in the continuity of the communication process, i.e. failing to provide linkage, in other words to supply the expected intratextuality, is not necessarily a faulty/imperfect or vicious literary strategy, particularly when it is the distinct authorial intention to create these instances. impaired intratextuality exists because the author of the book intended to achieve particular effects on their authorial audience at particular stages in their reading process. These effects can be cognitive, emotional and ethical. To extend our argument, an intelligent and diligent author ensures intratextuality or fails to do it, delays intratextuality or, on the contrary, stresses it readily and excessively as means to support his or her strategy. (Granted disregarding intratextuality can also mean, with less valuable and sloppy writers, an unacceptable defective/imperfect, shallow strategy, due to careless omissions.)

## 5. The narrative line and the resistance to it.

Sometimes texts offer the challenge of the labyrinth as a reading strategy (in preference to the impulse to unity), as they deny narrative linearity: the progressivism of linearity being sprinkled with complex twists and turns. Fragmentation and linear indecorum are evidence of playfulness and an unstable, ambivalent authorial voice which refuses any easy putting together of the novels´s structure. A classical intratextual move, when reading a notoriously digressive, intratextually indecorous text, is the relating of apparently disparate parts of the text, in order to enhance the reading of each. Writers are consciously in control of the intratextual relationships in the text and force their audiences to navigate around their disjunctive, fragmented texts, and challenging the fact that they have learnt to read for unity, wholeness and smoothness. "In this reading, the messy bittiness of the text releases a subtle political reading when one text is read in the light of another" (Sharrock 9-10). Diversity is a constituent of coherence. It might include digression, but any such must be smoothly articulated with the surrounding text. Even the existence of ´parts´ which apparently deny all relevance and claim for themselves an absolute aesthetic value does not imply that interaction with other parts is wholly unimportant. To stress the ultimate interconnectedness of everything, we have to acknowledge that texts necessarily come in parts; they come apart. Therefore, it is inherent in the act of reading that we, as readers and critics, divide texts into bite-sized chunks. This may help us find our way but also it breaks up the continuity that the text can offer. Fragmentation is a pozitive value - an approach which involves pulling texts apart allowing us to appreciate intricate stuctures. It means denial of linear teleology and an akward juxtaposition of disjointed elements. Intratextuality may help us to say positive things about spectacular irrelevancies, just as intertextuality helped us say positive things



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about poetic debt. The idea that fragmentation might be a principle of organization, or might produce coherent readings, returns us, by the back door, to design. Finally, formal textuality is directly connected to thematic textuality. Making the parts of a text fit together means making sense of it in order to be able to read it. However, this matter of finding the whole, has to be completed with problematizing its wholeness, with "reading a text as universe (the ultimate whole)" (11).

### 6. An intratextual investigation of the Zuckerman series- general remarks

As stated previously reading intratextually or reading for coherence means looking at the bulky Zuckerman text from various directions (backwards, forwards, diagonally), chopping it up according to particular topics and presently building it up again, as welll as expanding the boundaries of each opus so as to turn the perception of natural fragmentation into the perception of a clear design and thus stress the ultimate interconnectedness of everything.

As far as we know, the concept of intratextuality has not been used as terminology to talk about the Zuckerman series. This does not mean though that critics and reviewers have not spoted the multiplicity of relations between the parts that make up the Zuckerman project. Thus, W. H. Gass, in his review of *The Counterlife* writes:

> *The book comes to us wrapped in more than its dust jacket. It continues and seems to conclude a series of affairs, ambitions and other anxieties taken from the life of Nathan Zuckerman; a life whose telling began before its tolling in "The Ghost Writer" of 1979, and which, after two more novels, "Zuckerman Unbound" in 1981, then "The Anatomy Lesson" in 1983, was advertised as ending in 1985 with the addition of a novella, "The Prague Orgy," so that the entire collection could be called "Zuckerman Bound," a volume you were encouraged to buy in the belief that at last you had hold of the whole thing. So our present text is legitimately preceded, if not surrounded, by the four books that carry the Zuckerman name to this point.*

According to the principle of intratextuality, the nine novels of the Zuckerman project are the parts which make up the whole and arise out of the whole. At this point in time when the series is announced to be complete, our own perspective is: standing outside the centre looking inward, as a result we perceive only the parts which are between us and the internal unit. If in chapter three the macrostructure, or division of the Zuckerman text (project) into books and chapters, provided the point of departure for interpretation, in this chapter the partitioning becomes less important, the interpretation relying more and more on internal structuring elements of the project, its microstructure, for its organization. In other words, an intratextual reading of the project based on its microstructural composition.

The nine novels known collectively as the Zuckerman books interact on several levels, forming a complex network of interrelationships, a microstructure. As a result, a full deciphering of the complete text requires knowledge of all nine books. An internal



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system of references and correspondences structures the text in a systematic way, providing a clear perspective to the architectural composition of the entire Zuckerman series. There are instances of *intratextuality* in every element involved in the rhetorical communication.

## 7. Difficulties in retrieving the coherence

According to the reader criticism and to the rhetorical approach criticism, readers of the Zuckerman books are required quite a generous degree of activity in order to make the series appear completely coherent. First, because they are dealing with a nine-book project. Second, because Roth took twenty-seven years to complete it, a period when these books were interspersed with others. Third, because the project contains such a variety of configurations and patterns. Forth, because over the years the treatment of the character Nathan Zuckerman (the main coherence device) has shifted dramatically, being used to serve a variety of purposes. For all these reasons the project is not immediately coherent, to put it another way it falls into the category of "the not-yet-coherent" (Rabinowitz 146). There are numerous surface inconsistencies/ruptures that need to be explained and readers require a special effort and the application of particular rules of coherence to make sense of all the project's potentialities.

On the other hand, before we proceed to the desired activity of reworking elements into a total pattern, we would like to point out that it is *because* of these surface ruptures, *because* of the extraneous details and the unexpected patterns, *because* of the elements of surprise that characterize each new installment of the character Nathan Zuckerman and *because* of the complex system of significations this Roth's series of novels has been so highly appreciated in current academic critical discussion.

In view of the explanations above, the analysis of the coherence of the Zuckerman project which follows is based on conceiving coherence as the readers' pursuit in which they partake in order to determine as much as that is possible the authorial intention. According to Rabinowitz (149) readers do that by identifying and building their explanation on the shared conventions of coherence, by means of which writers planned their effects. Rabinowits points out that the fundamental rule of coherence is to start from the premise (even if this eventually proves to have been a mistake) that there is an implicit coherence and that "apparent flaws in its construction are intentional and meaning bearing' (146). Therefore, here is my assumption about the basic element of coherence of the Zuckerman project: the series presents Roth's stand on what making literature means and on the way this profession impacts the writer's everyday life and eventually decides his destiny.

In *Before Reading* (148) the theorist identifies three types of situations in which texts appear to be incoherent. First, texts can be insufficient—that is, they can be apparently incoherent because of gaps in their fabric, holes that need to be filled in. Second, works can be overabundant—they can have a surplus of information that we need somehow to tame, including details that seem to contradict one another and that we need to reconcile.



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Finally, works can be simply disparate—and we need rules to help us bundle them together into convenient packages.

The Zuckerman project, due to its bulkiness and particularity, includes all three to a larger or lesser extent. Firstly, I will refer to the gaps. The series chronicles an American writer's life. It starts with the writer in pursuit of authorial validation in his early twenties and ends with the writer's acknowledgement of the decline of his physical and, most importantly, authorial powers in his late seventies. In between these two biographical points Nathan Zuckerman is depicted:

- trying to cope with the consequences of achieving editorial fame (*Zuckerman Unbound*)
- enduring an unnamable pain and creative impotence (*The Anatomy Lesson*)
- attempting to retrieve a dead writer's stories from behind the Iron Curtain ("The Prague Orgy")
- experimenting with the creation of fictionalized counterlives (*The Counterlife*)
- researching and chronicling the lives of three remarkable people in his entourage (the American trilogy)

These are exactly seven selected moments in the life in Zuckerman flashed on the page, all concerned with the evolution of his writing career, evolution conveyed (mostly) by means of Zuckerman's own books or journal entries.

What about the holes in between, what about what is going on in the interstices? As a rule every reader assumes that what is not depicted is not an important or relevant. Zuckerman's childhood and teenage are not depicted, nor are his marriages or divorces for that matter. And the list of such textual lacunae can be enlarged. Our view on this matter is that by means of these gaps the author/narrator leaves out information which tends to be repeated, as we have already witnessed Zuckerman's dealing with certain major issues, or unproblematic periods in the character's life. Actually, getting divorced and being diagnosed with cancer and being completely estranged by your only sibling are far from being unproblematic, but these aspects have either been tackled or they do not condition his writing career or his conception of literature which are the subject of the series. Therefore, when, occasionally, references are made to any of these biographical periods not depicted extensively, it is because the implied author intends to make a point about grounds or consequences of his character's calling.

Secondly, I will comment on the surfeit in each novel. Indeed, there are pages of information which appear extraneous and make the text a little excessive. According to Rabinowitz, however, in general these are only apparently irrelevant textual features. Admittedly, they do not contribute to plot or characterization, or do not serve some immediate function, like the provision of verisimilitude or local color, but they "are to be treated as figurative"/symbolic (154). As for contradictory information in this over 2,500-page project, there are just a few, unimportant pieces. Rabinowitz clarifies this matter also: characters are more likely to be correct after undergoing experiences worthy of narration than before them. Thus Zuckerman's final perception of himself and his art, his



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altered views are to be considered by the reader as wiser and more understanding than those views he holds at the beginning of the series. We, the readers, are to accept the last vision in a text, as it comes from a reliable character.

Many critics have noticed, the Zuckerman books do "not merge smoothly into a continuous narrative" (Wallace 18), as there are a number of aspects which challenge the readers' smooth grasping of Zuckerman's saga. Thus, the most significant are discontinuities of point of view (*The Ghost Writer* is related in the first person, *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson* are in the third person, the epilogue, "The Prague Orgy," is presented as an extract "from Zuckerman's notebooks", then the rest of the novels are to first person narrations interspersed with third person and with free indirect discourse), inexplicable gaps between the events narrated in each book. Knowing the genesis of the series, one can understand why Roth, shifted direction on so many axes while working on this project. The sequence not been published "serially" with other novels written in-between. Several unexpected shifts throughout the series. (Maybe four in all). In every trilogy Roth goes deeper and deeper and twists around to different perspectives again and again. Then somehow he makes entirely new shifts, recasting all previous books in a deeper light. his felt like the perfect conclusion.

Thirdly, the Zuckerman project appears to be a mixture of disparate materials. In order to bundle such material academic readers, in particular, name and thus classify works—for instance, by appropriating them to particular generic categories, by elucidating their central theme, or by finding their governing metaphoric or mythic structure. Roth's comments on the project are of utmost importance in figuring out the bundle rule. Thus, in a recent interview Roth refers to his character Nathan Zuckerman, as depicting "the drama of his own life", and to the nine books as "charting Zuckerman's adventures as a writer". In light of this statements, the variety of configurations, progressions, topics, techniques are subordinated to a organizational design: the biography of a writer, from the moment he is validated as one till the demise of his literary power and capability.

Roth enhanced the coherence of both his every book taken individually and his project by using different bundling conventions:

*The Ghost Writer* – Roth has Zuckerman call it a bildungsroman and alludes to his becoming a writer.

*Zuckerman Unbound* – Roth gives this book a governing metaphor as the title, and makes sure that the end makes it explicit. In the economy of the project the title suggests a phase in Zuckerman's life in which his ties with his old life are cut off and he is completely left to devote to his calling.

*The Anatomy Lesson* - In a wider sense, a lesson is an insight gained by a learner into previously unfamiliar subject-matter. The lesson in Zuckerman's case is triggered by pain and it teaches him about the relationship between life and literature.



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"The Prague Orgy" – Roth has Zuckerman, the narrator himself, name this story a "parable"[3], to point out that the brief journey to Prague is to depict a universal truth, which as it was already shown in the previous chapter is related to the relation between literature and the historical, social and political condition of the writer.

*The Counterlife* – In the title Roth makes it clear that the writer Nathan Zuckerman is playing with the potentialities of fiction to fabricate counterfates.

*The American trilogy* – The three novels make up a loose trilogy. The bundling activity in their case is "facilitated through the use of parallelisms" (Rabinowitz, 159). Parallels along the axis of Zuckerman's interest in other people's destinies imply parallels along another: the protagonists are all exceptional men, attempting transgression and ending in failure. The novels are variations of the same theme, i.e. it is appropriate to see them as three different exemplifications of the same metaphoric meaning: exceptional individuals' attempts at transgression promised by the "American dream" crushed by historical circumstances.

*Exit Ghost* – "Exit" is a theatrical term instructing an actor to leave the scene; therefore, the novel is a "swan song" - an idiom referring to a final theatrical or dramatic appearance, or any final work or accomplishment. It is a novel employing the character-narration technique; this, together with the title, carries the connotation that the performer/the narrator-protagonist is aware that this is the last performance of his lifetime, and is expending everything in one magnificent final effort.

**8. Conclusion.**

When one observes the sequence through the lenses of the intratextual features, the nine texts which make up the Zuckerman books turn out to be formally discrete narratives which represent *reflections of one another, as different ways of saying in chronological order what is, in the end, the same story.*

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[3]The word "parable" comes from the Greek *parabolē,* the name given by Greek rhetoricians to any fictive illustration in the form of a brief narrative. Later it came to mean a fictitious narrative, generally referring to something that might naturally occur, by which spiritual and moral matters might be conveyed. A parable is a short tale that illustrates universal truth, one of the simplest of narratives. It sketches a setting, describes an action, and shows the results. It often involves a character facing a moral dilemma, or making a questionable decision and then suffering the consequences. As with a fable, a parable generally relates a single, simple, consistent action, without extraneous detail or distracting circumstances.



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