

How Stories Work by Manipulating What We Don't Know: Gaps as the Generators of Narrativity

Dr. Eyal Segal

I would like to discuss Meir Sternberg's theory of gaps (developed over a period of about four decades, beginning with his 1968 article "The King through Irony Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process") as a useful and effective tool for the understanding of narratives. According to Sternberg, gaps are fundamental to narrativity, which he defines in the rhetorical-functional terms of narrative interest (rather than the mimetic terms of represented action) – an interest which results from the manipulation of informational gaps.

Various uses of the term "gaps" show considerable conceptual disparity behind terminological similarity. Therefore, I would like to address four areas in which Sternberg's approach is distinct from other critical approaches in the field. The first two tend to make the "gaps" according to Sternberg more sharply and narrowly defined, whereas the final two tend to make their understanding more comprehensive within the relevant framework.

1. Sternberg conceives of gaps as referential (i.e., relating to the storyworld) and chronological – as distinct, for example, from Wolfgang Iser, for whom gaps designate pretty much whatever the text has left unsaid or unconnected.
2. A clear distinction between "gaps" and "blanks," or "indeterminacies" (the latter category being more-or-less parallel to Roman Ingarden's "Unbestimmtheitsstellen"). The former are the result of deliberate artistic manipulation and are compositionally, semantically, and rhetorically crucial, whereas the latter are the inevitable result of the selectivity of representation and are irrelevant, or at best incidental, to the understanding of the narrative.
3. Taking account of both permanent and temporary gaps. Typically, the first type tends to get considerably more notice (as well as to get confused with indeterminacies, since in both cases we are dealing with a permanent lack of information). However, notice of temporary gaps is also essential to explain the dynamics of reading – or of the textual sequence – even if they "don't count" anymore as gaps when the text reaches its end.
4. A recognition of three types of narrative gaps, in accordance with the three master-types of interest that, according to Sternberg, constitute narrativity: suspense, curiosity, and surprise; of these, curiosity gaps tend to be perceived as prototypical, often to the detriment of the two other types (a good example of that can be found in Wolf Schmid's recent study of "the nonnarrated"). The reason is probably that curiosity gaps feature both awareness of the missing information and its "realness" within the storyworld (as belonging to the narrative past), whereas both suspense and surprise gaps lack one of these attributes. Suspense gaps seem less "real" because they relate to expectations about the narrative future – that is, what hasn't happened yet in the storyworld (and may never actually happen); surprise gaps are based on lack of awareness about their existence until the surprise actually lends. However, overlooking or neglecting these two types when discussing gaps considerably limits our

ability to understand how narratives work, since all three types are structurally and functionally interrelated.