

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Examining Conceptual Variations of Narrative Gaps: Insights from Stylistic Analysis

Hussein Huwail Ghayadh \*

University of Thi-Qar , College of Basic Education , Iraq

## ABSTRACT

Narrative theory has theorized the claim that the semiotic construction of narrated events structures the perceptual and interpretive processes of readers. Grounded in this theorization, examining the extent to which narrative gaps, considering gaps as a mode of stylistic construction, has consistently demonstrated its analytical richness. In this narrative analytical context, it is worth pointing out that narrative gaps constitute the focus of critics, particularly in reader-response criticism, but such a field of analysis (narrative gap analysis) requires a theoretically grounded stylistic approach. The principal aim of this paper is to trace the representation of distinct conceptual configurations of narrative gaps through the application of a theoretically grounded reader-oriented narrative stylistic analysis. Such an aim shows the extent to which narrative gaps impose mental cognitive load on readers' awareness, which in turn contributes to enhancing the thematic complexity of the text. The methodology constructs an integrative framework of stylistics with cognitive narratology, reader-response analysis, fictional worlds, and semiotic perspectives. The findings give rise to the conclusion that narrative gaps act as intentional stylistic techniques, structurally create ambiguity, emotionally stimulate cognitive engagement, and, from a meaning interpretative perspective, create multilayered meanings. Such narrative gaps and stylistic realizations are illuminated through discursively constructed linguistic-stylistic patterns, which are distributed across a range from deviations at the graphological level to techniques of narrative focalization.

**KEYWORDS:** Narrative gaps, stylistic overcoding, saturation, temporal gaps, negation, blank.

مقال بحثي

## دراسة التباينات المفاهيمية للفجوات السردية: رؤى من التحليل الأسلوبي

حسين حويل غياض \*

جامعة ذي قار ، كلية التربية الأساسية ، العراق

### الملخص:

ذهبت نظرية السرد إلى أن السرد يُشكّل الإدراك البشري آلية تشكيل الدلالة؛ ومع ذلك، لا تزال العلاقة بين الفجوات السردية والأسلوبية مجالاً خصباً للبحث. على الرغم من دراسة الفجوات السردية بشكل شامل ضمن إطار نقد استجابة القارئ، ولا سيما في الأعمال المؤثرة للعديد من المنظرين والنقاد الأدبيين، إلا أن هذا المجال لا يزال يفتقر إلى تفسير أسلوبي منهجي لاستكشاف كيفية تضمين هذه الفجوات لغوياً وتشفيرها على مستوى بنية السرد. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد المتغيرات المفاهيمية للفجوات السردية، وتقديم تحليل أسلوبي من خلال دمج رؤى نظرية استجابة القارئ مع المنظورات اللغوية. والغرض من هذا الدمج هو إظهار كيف تُشكّل الفجوات السردية تفسيرات القارئ وتُعزز التعقيد الموضوعي للنص. تستخدم منهجية البحث التحليل الأسلوبي والمعرفي، والتحليل الأسلوبي وتحليل استجابة القارئ، والتحليل الأسلوبي والدلالي، والتحليل الأسلوبي وتحليل العوالم التخيلية، وعلم السرد الأسلوبي والمعرفي. تكشف النتائج أن الفجوات السردية تعمل كأدوات أسلوبية مقصودة، تُؤلّد الغموض، وتُحفّز التفاعل المعرفي، وتُنتج معاني متعددة الطبقات. وقد تم تحديد هذه الآليات الأسلوبية من خلال آليات لغوية منهجية، تشمل الانحرافات الكتابية، والتضاد الدلالي، والتركيبات النحوية، وتقنيات التركيز. وتُقدّم الدراسة منهجية هيكلية لتصور الفجوات السردية كمكونات نصية جوهرية تُؤطر تفاعل القراء وتُسهم في تعقيد السرد. ولتحقيق ذلك، تُقدّم الدراسة بعض الآثار الجوهرية لدراسة علم السرد، والأسلوبية، والمناهج المعرفية للسرد.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الكلمات المفتاحية: الفجوات السردية، الترميز الأسلوبي المفرد، التشبع، الفجوات الزمنية، النفي، الفراغ.

Received 00-00- 2026; revised 00 -00 -2026; accepted 00-00- 2026. Available online 30-03- 2026

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [huwailhussein@utq.edu.iq](mailto:huwailhussein@utq.edu.iq) (H.H. Ghayadh).

<https://doi.org/xx.xxxx/2572-5440.1097>

2572-5440/© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Al-Muthanna University. This is an open-access article under the CC BY-NC-SA license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).

## Introduction

One of the theories that played a decisive role in shaping individuals' narrative awareness is the narrative theory, through its construction of different methodological approaches. In this regard, the critical point of concern that narrative theory focuses on is the distinction between narrative and non-narrative discourse. It is not only the core concern of making a distinction, but also of grasping the underlying mechanisms through which meaning is discursively encoded and decoded. Theorized from this perspective, a narrative, according to Mackenzie ([1], p. 158), "is an organizing structure that explains actions and events by integrating them into meaningful and coherent temporal patterns or sequences". This theoretical formulation brings into focus the constitutive and operative role of narrative in configuring human cognitive processes and constructing communicative meaning. Consistent with this, Mackenzie's argument on narrative is rationally compatible with structural and cognitive processes underlying narrative. These processes extend beyond the recording of events to the meaningful representation of events.

Proceeding from this theoretical premise, Chatman [2, p. 31] argues that "narratives are communications". Such a narrative argument remarks that, through the process of narration, there is a possibility of conceptual understanding of the reciprocal and multilayered interaction between the narrator, the configuration of narrative discourse, and the audience's interpretive processes. Chatman's theoretical stance provides a critical counterpoint to the strand of narrative theory that considers the domain of narrative as an intrinsically closed structure existing as a context-independent construct. Instead, [2] asserts that a narrative is not merely a linear or non-linear sequence of events but a conscious and purposeful act of sharing meaning from one person to another. In parallel with this claim, he offers additional insight by remarking that "What is communicated is *story*, the formal content element of narrative; and it is communicated by *discourse*, the formal expression element" (p. 31, italics in the original). Chatman distinguishes

between story (events, settings, and characters) and discourse (the manner of narrating), proposing a dual structure that is critical for grasping the ways narrative conveys meaning.

With regard to this, the concept of narrative gaps has received significant critical focus in the field of narratology (see e.g. [6]; [7]; [4]; [8]; [9]) as well as in reader-response theory (see e.g. [10]; [11]; [12]; [13]; [14]; [15]; [16]). Nevertheless, much of this academic research has focused on the existence of gaps, the way they shape the reader's interpretive processes, or the categorization of various types of narrative gaps. In this regard, Hardy [8], through his analysis of narrative gaps, focuses on the distinction between what is overtly presented and what is covertly embedded. Similarly, Gerrig [16] proposes a theoretical framework to differentiate between story and discourse (how gaps arise from both levels), whereas Leitch [9] examines the hermeneutics of narrative gaps, exploring the parameters that determine acceptable and unacceptable interpretations.

Furthermore, in this study, what deserves to be foregrounded is the relationship between stylistics and narratology. Both demonstrate interchangeability in context, as formulated by [16, p. 193], "'style' and 'discourse' appear to be interchangeable, each fully covering the level of presentation in verbal narratives." On the grounds that "style," in Shen [17, p. 1698], "is commonly seen as a choice of form ('manner') to express content ('matter')," and functionally equivalent to what may be construed as "discourse" in [2, p. 190] theoretical formulation as "the expression, the means by which the content is communicated".

Moving from explicitness to implicitness, some narrative theorists have proposed that narratives should always remain explicit. In this context, Menary [3, p. 65] remarks that the reason for claiming that explicitness is constitutive to textual coherence (indispensable explicitness) is based on the assumption that "narratives are told to an audience". However, this claim is subject to certain constraints, since figurative language challenges the idea of explicitness, involving, as its core, indirect reference, semantic indeterminacy, and interpretive depth.

Narratives are sometimes tacit rather than overt, shaping our perception, constructing our personal identities, and making sense of reality.

Focusing more precisely on the hidden aspect of narratives, Prince [4, p. 155], as [4] aligns with the broader scope of narrative theory, refers to the theoretical premise of implicit narrative when he affirms that “Narrative proceeds from one set of states or actions to another. . . each giving rise to a certain number of possibilities. Some of these are realized and some are not.” Narrative gaps (unrealized possibilities in Prince’s words) enrich the discursive scope of narrative representation by foregrounding the multilayered complexity of narrative configurations. Within the parameters of this analytical construct, particularly as conceptualized within Prince’s narrative construction, stylistic analysis of narrative discourse can be methodologically conducted not only through the representation of explicitly encoded narrative (the surface-level discursive content) but also through the implied semantic and pragmatic dimensions (left to the readerly inference). In relation to this point, an indirectly conveyed narrative (inferential narrative dimension) can be inferred from Iser’s theoretical formulation when he theorizes that “No tale can be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus, whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in gaps left by the text itself” Iser [5, p. 104].

To make this comprehension of narrative representation within readers’ interpretive processes (accessible to readers’ understanding), the importance of conducting an analysis of narrative gaps (the problem statement for the present research) is structured around the extent to which narrative gaps, stylistically, have the potential to trigger readers’ interpretive processes to construct and decode meaning through gaps of semantic underdetermination. Although thorough attention has been devoted to the thematic domains of this topic,

specifically within reader-response criticism [5], a systematic stylistic examination is still necessary to provide an account of how narrative gaps are linguistically encoded at the level of narrative discourse. In accordance with this account, formulating a hybrid framework that integrates stylistic analysis with the reader-response theory offers a stylistic-narratological analysis grounded in textual data on how ambiguity is encoded linguistically, how ellipsis activates pragmatic presupposition (contextual recoverability of meaning), and how fragmentation shapes text coherence and cohesion. Such an analysis demonstrates that a spectrum of ellipsis-based structures cannot be restricted to elided narrative structures; rather, they are semiotically loaded stylistic choices deliberately used to activate co-constructive meaning-making, i.e., there is a semiotic interaction between the reader and the text. Accordingly, all these theoretical observations lead to the conclusion that stylistics can be viewed as a powerful and well-structured analytical approach.

In sum, this study presents a systematic stylistic analysis of narrative ambiguity. It examines the stylistic elements of narrative gaps, including Kermode’s temporal gaps, Iser’s negation and blank, Eco’s stylistic overcoding, Doležel’s saturation, and Caracciolo’s cognitive blank. Providing narrative excerpts, the section that follows examines the theoretical frameworks proposed by theorists and critics and their practical application within the text to illustrate the conceptual variation of narrative gaps.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Textual Practice

Narrative, as a complex construction of the textual world, commonly embeds carefully constructed indeterminate elements (as cognitive and aesthetic devices) that compel readers to co-construct meaning through an imaginative and interpretive process. Consistent with this view, Chrzanowska-Kluczevska [19, p. 110] argues, “incompleteness in the construction and details of the textual world can be seen as either a challenge to the reader (especially

the so-called lazy or unsophisticated reader) or else a source of pleasure, specifically to the imaginative interpreter.” Armstrong [20, p. 48] supports this vision of cognition, defending the aesthetic value of incompleteness in artistic discourses, “The artistic values of disruption and disjunction are also consistent with a decentred, parallel-processing model of the brain. Aesthetically pleasing purposive dissonance is not noise. Unlike the randomness and disorganization of noise, aesthetically meaningful dissonance is an internally coherent structure of differences that is strategically opposed to the harmonies it disrupts. The cognitive purposes of dissonance have to do with how the plasticity of the brain organizes itself.”

Armstrong’s focus on dissonance as a cognitively impactful mode of narrative interruption aligns with the manner in which narrative theorists have theorized narrative gaps. Expanding this theoretical orientation, the study of narrative gaps, particularly through integrating aesthetics and insights derived from cognitive theory, has been extensively examined on account of its role in structuring and directing the analysis of narrative. In this particular context, Kermode [21] theorizes the concept of narrative gap, most notably in its conceptualization of how narrative encodes temporal representation. He used the term ‘temporal gap’, regardless of its structure as short or long, to configure and encode a temporal gap that is realized between the “original apprehension of what the situation signifies and the final understanding that its significance was other” [p. 53].

Within the theoretical conceptualization of narrative structure, the concept of the ‘temporal gap’ creates a bidirectional constitutive interaction between schema conformity and schema deviation. Such bidirectionality not only shapes our time perception but also constructs the meaning throughout the temporal structuring of events. This, in turn, reorients attention toward the possibility that meaning may not be an essential constitutive element or cognitively transparent but rather cognitively inferred through experiential interaction. Narrowing

the analytical space, the basic meaning is neither static nor open-ended. A temporal gap marks a boundary between the static and the open-ended interpretations. These interpretive gaps are discursively constructed due to the reader’s awareness and the extent to which it is temporarily shifted away or redirected within the “initial deviation of attention” (p. 53), where the reader remarks on the event from a definite perspective.

Through the successive phases that follow, as the plot moves forward, further information inspire readers to reconfigure and shape their interpretive perspective, where there is a realization that the situation gives rise to the implication that what is implied is more complex than what is explicitly constructed. Hence, this necessitates a critical rethinking of the initial data (re-evaluation), acquiring additional context (new information), evolving our understanding (shifting perspectives), and bringing to light complex semiotic implications (the unfolding of events).

To make Kermode’s concept of the temporal gap more perceptible, consider a markedly ambiguous episode from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, where the intended meaning is hidden:

**“A FULLY DRESSED woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree... Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her”** Morrison [22, p. 50].

Drawing on this episode, the capitalized words ‘A FULLY DRESSED’ are a graphological deviation (direct stylistic label), where Leech [23, p. 105] state that ‘graphological choice which is to some degree marked or unconventional’. In this respect, such use of graphology serves to achieve narrative defamiliarization Shklovsky [24]. From the viewpoint of conventional reading norms, if a character is styled as ‘fully dressed’, we decode that description with reduced cognitive load (for a more detailed discussion, see Sweller [25] discussion of cognitive load). By contrast, through deliberate

capitalization, Morrison compels the reader to engage more deeply with these words.

At this stage, between narrative defamiliarization and initial apprehension, the narrator does not reveal the woman's identity. Ordinarily, people emerging from the water are typically wet and partially clothed, not fully dressed. In contrast, in this narrative, there are no contexts, no explanations, or detailed events; the scene appears symbolic. Consequently, the inaccessibility of meaning results from the writer's use of stylistic techniques to create cognitive dissonance, undermining narrative linearity and leading to the creation of a narrative gap. In line with this, the initial perception is that meaning is ambiguous, i.e., in Kermode's perspective, there is an 'initial deviation of attention'. It is worth noting that foregrounded linguistic choices (deviation of choices), such as deviation at the graphological level, draw the reader's attention to formal linguistic features rather than semantic content. This deviated stylistic technique leads to a delay in the process of interpretive construction. This means that the literal and implied meanings of the woman's emergence are deferred.

Moving through the narrative, it can be inferred that this woman is 'Beloved'. In a more focused sense, as a direct, non-metaphorical sense, 'Beloved' is the ghost of Seth, a daughter who has passed away. Because her daughter (Sethe) was a slave, she contended that death was the only possible means through which she could save her daughter's life from being enslaved. Parallel to this, 'Beloved', as a symbolic reading, stands for the embedded violence of slavery that is closely associated with Sethe's identity. In this interpretation, she metaphorically portrays the heavy shadow of the experience shaped by historical conditions and the emotional and psychological damage that slavery inflicts. Such narrative interpretation is congruent with Kermode's argument that narrative interpretation is 'other' rather than the initial perception. This narrative understanding is due to the

role of narrative gaps between events, and how they increase the reader's suspense, a psychological state that enhances the reader-text interaction.

In his work, "The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response" [6], he points out how narrative gaps function as a mechanism for conveying narrative meaning. [6, p. 69] argues that "Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves. Hence, the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text".

According to Iser, communication depends on the reader's ability to negotiate and complete the gaps embedded in the text. The act of communication begins when the reader infers the textual gaps. These textual gaps encourage the reader to engage with the text by constructing, decoding, or completing its meaning. This engagement is essential because bridging the gap is essential since it shifts reading from a passive act into a creative process. Thus, communication should not be considered as a linear transfer from writer to reader but as a dialogical construction in which meaning is negotiated between text and reader.

To take the argument further, Iser, in his theory of narrative gaps, identifies *negation* and *blank* as critical concepts. He describes a multi-layered dialectical process where negation and blank merge to construct new meanings through the dialectical exchange between pre-existing and newly formed interpretations. [6, p. 217] clarifies the bidirectional influence between negation and blank within the process of meaning construction: "It is through the blanks that the negations take on their productive force: the old negated meaning returns to the conscious mind when a new one is superimposed onto it; this new meaning is unformulated, and for precisely this reason needs the old, as this has been changed by the negation back into material for interpretation, out of which the new meaning is to be

fashioned”. Building on this argument, encountering negation as a productive force (In Iser’s theory, negation is a stylistic negation that goes beyond grammar, such as contradiction, concealment, questioning, or recontextualization) does not mean concealing the former meaning. More precisely, negation reshapes the earlier meaning into raw ‘material for interpretation’; i.e., it deconstructs the former understanding but keeps it active in the interpretive process. Within the same Iser’s interpretive frame, the blanks, as creative spaces, constitute the domain in which readers construct meaning. They create the essential gap or opening where the reader’s mind negotiates the prior negated meaning and the newly emerging one. This process, therefore, is called a dialectical one. In other words, the new meaning does not arise from nothing, but it arises from the dialectical interaction between the destabilized old meaning and the unformulated new one. As a result, this dialectical interaction shows the mechanism through which literary texts construct complexity and richness. Ultimately, literary works do not merely convey a chronological and logical sequence of ideas but create complex interpretive experiences in which negations produce blanks that function as spaces for active interpretation. Fluck [26, p. 185] confirms the dual productive function of negation proposed by Iser, stating that “Negation, therefore, not only produces blanks within the textual repertoire but also maneuvers the reader into an intermediate position between what is canceled and what has to be supplied as the motivation for the cancellation.”

To shed light on Iser’s concepts of negation and blank, the following analysis examines a specific extract from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, showing how these theoretical concepts are realized in the text. A rich illustration of Iser’s concepts presents itself when Raskolnikov’s internal monologue brings out the contradiction between his high-minded philosophical intentions and his common fear:

**“To think that I can contemplate such a terrible act and yet be afraid of such trifles,” he thought,**

**and he smiled strangely. ‘Hm . . . yes . . . a man holds the fate of the world in his two hands, and yet, simply because he is afraid, he just lets things drift—that is a truism...’** Dostoevsky [27, pp. 1-2].

Initially, considering the prior meaning, one might interpret Raskolnikov as a person endowed with the ability to achieve remarkable acts: ‘a man holds the fate of the world in his two hands.’ Subsequently, the *negation* occurs. But his exaggerated self-image is at once negated when he recognizes himself as ‘afraid of such trifles,’ considering that his affirmation that fear governs and shapes his actions, causes him to ‘just let things drift.’ Furthermore, the *blank* emerges. For literary purposes, the text maintains this contradiction to create an interpretive gap. Textual contradictions that give rise to interpretive gaps, such as the inconsistency in the character’s courage or priorities, allow him to acknowledge that he can ‘contemplate such a terrible act,’ even though he is ‘afraid of such trifles.’ Another contradictory aspect is when the character remarks that ‘a man holds the fate of the world in his two hands’ to imply power; however, he admits, due to fear, that he stands by passively as things happen, ‘simply because he is afraid, he just lets things drift.’ Next, prior meaning becomes ‘material for interpretation.’ The initial perception of Raskolnikov as endowed with potential power is not eliminated; rather, it becomes ‘raw material’ for new meaning, taking into account that this image should be kept even as it is fragmented. Finally, a new unformulated interpretation needs the old meaning. As Raskolnikov grows increasingly conscious of his inner fragmentation, he relies on an exaggerated self-image to preserve his sense of credibility.

From a stylistic perspective, alignment can be recognized as directly relevant between the concepts of negation and blank, on the one hand, and stylistics, on the other hand. First, Iser’s blanks, as stylistic markers, are portrayed in ellipses and punctuation gaps. The ellipses in ‘Hm . . . yes . . .’ create textual blanks that activate the reader to reconstruct meaning. From a stylistic perspective, the punctuation marks reflect uncertainty, fragmented

thinking, or content left unsaid. The pronoun ‘such’ in the phrase ‘such a terrible act’, acts as a stylistic marker. It gives rise to semantic vagueness. On the stylistic level, Dostoevsky uses vague deictic references as referential blanks. The incomplete syntax ‘that is a truism...’ constitutes another stylistic component. Finally, the incomplete sentence ends with an ellipsis, urging the reader to infer the conclusion tacitly.

Second, Iser’s negation, as stylistic contradictions, is conveyed through *semantic opposition*. The semantic opposition, as a stylistic choice, is manifested through semantically lexical choices: ‘terrible’ (great) in ‘contemplate such a terrible act’ and ‘trifles’ (small) in ‘afraid of such trifles.’ The negation process, through juxtaposition, reconfigures conventional ideas of right and wrong in such a way that actions that could be interpreted as ‘terrible’ are reduced to subjects of contemplation, whereas ‘trifles’ reveal unexpected paralyzing power. Furthermore, *ironic modality* is another form of stylistic contradiction. The adverb ‘strangely’ in the phrase ‘he smiled strangely’ marks contradiction. The smile is incongruent with the seriousness of his thoughts. Conventional emotional reactions are negated, creating interpretive ambiguity. The *hyperbolic metaphor* is another component. The phrase ‘fate of the world’ is juxtaposed with the language of understatement, ‘simply because.’ The exaggerated self-perception is both confirmed and questioned through negation. The last stylistic feature is the use of *free indirect discourse*. The narrative voice aligns with Raskolnikov’s inner mind, resulting in indistinct boundaries between the narrator’s voice and the character’s inner world. This, in turn, allows contradictory viewpoints to coexist without resolution, which makes negation possible.

Taking the concept further, narrative gaps may also be realized through ‘stylistic overcoding’. Overcoded rules, as stated by Eco [28, p. 19], “tell the reader whether a given expression (be it a single term, a sentence, or an entire textual sequence) is used rhetorically.” In this regard, the rhetorical function of a narrative gap is to maintain ambiguity

and multiple layers of interpretation. Accordingly, rhetorical expression can direct the reader’s interpretation to fill the gap.

To make the concept of ‘overcoding’ more readily graspable through the lenses of stylistic perspectives, Eco [29, p. 134] confirms that this concept is not confined to grammatical structures. On the contrary, it operates beyond its basic linguistic patterns by extending semantic complexity across larger segments of textual constructions. He remarks that “overcoding proceeds in a twofold direction. It may be given that a code assigning meaning to certain minimal expressions, overcoding will assign additional meanings to more macroscopic strings of these expressions.” Building on this theoretical perspective, [29, p. 263] further deepens the argument by asserting that overcoding is governed by stylistic conventions. In his opinion, overcoded norms “depend on stylistic subcodes assigning an additional connotation both to isolated words and (more frequently) to ready-made sentences. Stylistic norms are thus an instance of overcoding.”

In this context, stylistic subcodes refer to a set of well-established stylistic rules that shape language use in a specific genre. Consequently, stylistic overcoding is triggered when conventional communicative norms systematically give rise to implicit layers of meaning (semantic and pragmatic dimensions) for readers who can decode the connotative values of stylistic subcodes. Thus, overcoding reveals the extent to which deliberate stylistic choices, within the constraints of their stylistic subcodes, carry high semantic density by drawing on familiar connotative codes. Coupled with this, stylistic overcoding, as discussed by [29, p. 133], highlights that “the whole series of stylistical and rhetorical rules operating in verbal language are cases of overcoding.” Therefore, stylistic overcoding is the semiotic process through which conventional norms are conceptually broadened to evoke multilayered meanings.

To conclude, stylistic overcoding explains the process by which the narrative voice is written in a deliberate, systematic, and structured manner. It

activates semantic ambiguity beyond the limits of the literal representation. It is a stylistic choice through which a literary text makes use of pre-existing codes (e.g., normative linguistic patterns and socio-cultural schemata) in a stylistically marked way to construct a more complex semiotic code.

To shed light on how Eco formulated the stylistic overcoding, it is appropriate to consider a thematically opaque scene from Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the intended meaning is overcoded:

**“At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs”** Márquez [30, p. 1].

The text provides an external description (external focalization), describing the village as a small, primitive one named Macondo (initial code), consisting of 20 adobe houses, located on the bank of the river. The narrative proceeds with an external description, stating that the water is clear, the river contains large, white, polished stones, and these stones evoke the image of prehistoric eggs.

In this text, particularly beyond the explicit description, the role of ‘overcoding’, as a stylistic technique, is to trigger cognitive interpretive schemas, which in turn enrich the narrative with multiple semantic layers of meaning. The use of a simile constructs a parallel between two conceptually distinct entities. The linguistic expression ‘like prehistoric eggs’ extends beyond the level of a straightforward descriptive representation of the stones. They reflect the embeddedness of culture as a symbolic code. From a stylistic perspective, the implicit reference to ‘prehistoric eggs’ overcodes as a culturally inherited symbol (opaque symbol) that points to the origin of existence. In addition, the simile functions as a stylistic conceptual technique to stimulate harmonious aesthetic coherence between the semantic environment (stones, river) and the reader’s cognitive conceptualization (prehistoric eggs). Through the use of metaphor, it contributes to an understanding of how cultural systems are

structured to shape the conceptualization of nature by integrating elements of the natural environment (e.g., white and enormous stones) with the ontological patterns of creation and the infinite continuum of time. Through this interpretive lens of ‘overcoding’, the narrative constructs the existence of Macondo as a symbolic interpretive lens. Such a symbolic perspective inspires readers that even ‘stones’ foreground thematic features of origin and creation. This stylistic interpretation aligns with Eco’s idea that signs, with reference to stylistic features such as simile, derive meaning from shared encyclopedic knowledge of a culture. Such a construction of meaning stimulates readers to interpret these stones not as reducible to their materiality but as semiotic units saturated with cultural and symbolic connotations. Embedded within the narrative, the linguistic choice of ‘prehistoric eggs’ is a richly multi-layered representation that demonstrates how meaning is derived from aesthetic language. Such an interpretation results from the interconnection between what we can see and touch (the real world) and ideas and imagination. In more specific language, the reader draws on their encyclopedic schemas of nature, cultural aspects, real time, and myth to create complex images open to multiple meanings. To refine the scope of analysis, the stylistic overcoding technique encodes underlying assumptions that are culturally and ideologically charged. It also shapes the reader’s construction of meaning through directing and guiding their interpretation, not from the perspective of those who observe nature directly, but through the close reading of poetic language.

A further step in theorizing of narrative gaps is suggested by Lubomir Doležel. Reframing the narrative gap concept within a wider context, Doležel [31] conceptualizes the relationship between *narrative gaps* as an “empty slot in the structure of an incomplete world” (p. 278) and *saturation* as the “ratio between fictional facts and gaps in the structure of the fictional world” (p. 281). Doležel’s theoretical perspective asserts that fictional worlds are characteristically fragmented. Gaps, in Doležel’s

view, do not diminish the integrity of the text; instead, they constitute a defining feature of fictionality. Similarly, saturation, as Doležel argues, is a measure of the informational density of a fictional world; more specifically, it is the stylistic choices that shape the scope and nature of the narrative gaps. Within a narrative, the degree of informational saturation is shaped not just by the total number of fictional facts (authenticated possible entities in Doležel's perspective) or narrative gaps, but rather by the dynamic balance maintained between explicit detail and narrative silence. In this context, a high ratio of gaps to fictional facts signals a fictionally dense and semantically rich world, or what is called a highly saturated world. Conversely, a low ratio indicates a saturated world of low-density, where significance is left ambiguous and open to readers' imagination. What is also relevant to the context of narrative gaps is Doležel's viewpoint concerning 'zero texture,' which is a cause of the narrative gap. In this context, he asserts that "When the author produces an explicit texture, he or she constructs a fictional fact. . . If no texture is written (zero texture), a gap arises in the fictional-world structure" (p. 169). Building on this claim, Doležel proposes a distinction between textual realization and ontological incompleteness. More specifically, the argument that an 'explicit texture' frames a 'fictional fact' draws attention to the idea that a fictional world is constructed from what is textually encoded. By contrast, 'zero texture' denotes the absence of encoded textual features that trigger narrative gaps.

Through the application of Doležel's framework of saturation, it indicates a balanced dynamic interaction with explicitly stated fictional elements and narrative gaps. Doležel's framework theorizes that narratively constructed worlds exert their influence through deliberately structured configurations between what is clearly or explicitly communicated (fictional facts) and what is not explicitly narrated (gaps). Not only is the ratio shaped by quantitative variables, but also through the qualitative aspects, where there is a structuring of semantic content functions in configuring meaning

through textual encoding and narrative gaps.

Drawing on this theoretical framework, the analysis that follows examines an excerpt selected from Sally Rooney's *Normal People* to indicate how narratively constructed facts and narrative gaps govern and direct the reader's interpretive process.

**"After the fundraiser the other night, Marianne told him this thing about her family. He didn't know what to say. He started telling her that he loved her. It just happened, like drawing your hand back when you touch something hot".** Rooney [32, p. 50].

The analysis begins with the representation of fictional facts. The text presents a structured cluster of linguistic choices as explicitly stated narrative facts. For example, the *temporal marker* expressed through "After the fundraiser the other night", frames a temporal context for the events. The second example is the *character action* marked by "Marianne told him this thing about her family" in which she shares identity-related information. The third is *Connell's reaction*, which can be seen in "He didn't know what to say", as she points to uncertainty. The fourth is *Connell's verbal response in* "He started telling her that he loved her", which can be regarded as an assertion of romantic feeling. The last example is *spontaneous narrative events communicated in* "It just happened, like drawing your hand back when you touch something hot". Each of these variables is unambiguously conveyed. This entails that each of them encodes fictional facts. Besides, the entire configuration of the aforementioned aspects shapes the explicitly realized textual structure on which the narrative plot and character interactions are socially and linguistically formed.

Second, the text contains several narrative gaps, acting as evidence of Doležel's concept of zero texture. *Marianne's content*, 'Marianne told him this thing about her family,' represents a gap in which the authentic information about her family is left vague, encouraging the reader to reconstruct and interpret its significance; *Connell's reaction*, 'He didn't know

*what to say*' and *'He started telling her that he loved her'* presents a gap where it is not directly stated why Connell reacts this way, the connection between her disclosure and his declaration of love is left implicit; *Marianne's response*, after he declares love, the text does not state how she reacts, creating a gap within interactive dynamics of scene; finally, *emotional resonance* occurs in Phrases like 'It just happened, like drawing your hand back when you touch something hot,' which suggest immediate response, but the underlying emotional motivation remains implicit.

To extend the concept of saturation further, in Doležel's model of fictional worlds, the saturation function is "an intensional function that determines the degree of the fictional world's saturation" (p. 281). Texts with high saturation leave few gaps for the reader to imagine. To illustrate high saturation, consider an extract from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*:

**"Dilsey stood for a while at the table, then she went and cleared the breakfast things from the dining-room and ate her breakfast and cleaned up the kitchen. Then she removed her apron and hung it up and went to the foot of the stairs and listened for a moment"** Faulkner [33, p. 24].

In the text, unambiguous chronological cues are clearly embedded, such as 'for a while,' 'then,' 'then,' and 'then,' thereby constructing a systematic ordering of events in time. Moreover, diverse and differentiated narrative spaces are described explicitly in the text (spatial coordinates), such as 'at the table,' 'dining-room,' 'kitchen,' and 'foot of the stairs,' which combine to form a highly saturated description of Dilsey's domestic environment. Further, every movement is recorded, such as standing (time and place), going to the dining room, clearing the breakfast items, eating, cleaning, removing and hanging her apron, going to the stairs, and listening. Such structured elaboration diminishes ambiguity and constructs a densely layered fictional world.

In contrast, with low saturation, texts offer under-specified information. Such limited information motivate the reader to reshape the narrative through inference. As an example of a low-saturated narrative, this study analyzes a textual extract from Faulkner:

**"I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it"** [33, p. 63].

In the text, phrases like 'mausoleum of all hope and desire,' 'reducto absurdum of all human experience,' and 'forget time' are highly abstract, not offering explicit elements about the story world. Consequently, they are low-saturated narratives since they describe states, emotions, or philosophical ideas rather than concrete events, objects, or places. This low saturation is further evident in the lack of spatio-temporal indicators, given that there is no sign of when and where these events occur. The last consideration is that the expression "his or his father's" does not provide a clear specification of the character's identity, actions, or even his communicative interactions.

As a concluding remark, the analytical construct proposed by Doležel, or, in more precise terms, *saturation* and *zero text*, indicates the author's deliberate use of stylistic choices, where these choices enrich the cognitive and aesthetic impact on how readers process and formulate meaning. Therefore, these theoretical concepts are not only restricted to theoretical configurations; yet, in real consideration of narrative construction, they are intentional stylistic choices. This demonstrates the assertion that textual ellipsis and inferential gaps in the text act as deliberate stylistic choices, rather than a stylistic defect.

In recent studies, Caracciolo [34] integrates

reader-response theory with cognitive narratology to explore how readers grasp thoughts and feelings from textual ambiguity or missing textual details. In this respect, these approaches align with the proposition that gaps are not constructed as deficiencies in narrative structure but as essential linguistic choices that trigger cognitive processing, particularly the reader's inferential processes. To illustrate, a narrative may deliberately omit certain events or states of affairs. Such 'silent omission' can be effective as 'expressive devices' to formulate narrative patterns such as surprise, anticipation, and tension-building, thereby making readers infer unstated details. Regarding this (omission in plot and events), [34, p. 44] states that "surprise is triggered when an event or state of affairs is silently omitted from the narrative, only to be revealed much later in discourse time, thus forcing readers to reinterpret past events." Drawing attention to 'discourse time' is intentionally used in Caracciolo's words. Discourse time is different from 'story time.' Story time (fabula time) refers to chronological arrangements of events (linearity) as they 'happen' within the narrative, whereas in discourse time, the author can manipulate the chronological order (nonlinearity) through diverse techniques to create specific aesthetic or cognitive effects [7]. Genette discussed various practices through which discourse time can deviate from story time. He formulated three principal categories: Order (analepsis, prolepsis, and in medias res), duration (ellipsis, summary, scene, stretch, and pause), and frequency (singulative, repetitive, and iterative). To analyze another aspect related to narrative gaps, Caracciolo draws attention to a narrative theoretical point that the textual realization of a character's inner world, particularly within varied discourse formations, foregrounds "gaps" in the text that readers are required to "fill in" through what is stylistically termed as a strategy of "continuing-consciousness frame", a term borrowed from Palmer [35]. The continuing-consciousness frame indicates a viewpoint of how readers engage with text and construct interpretive understandings of narrative gaps. Such a process is constituted through

the reader's 'inferential work', which reconstructs meaning across the gaps resulting from the character's silence. This implies that the interpretive role of this linguistic frame is to reduce the analytical challenge resulting from narrative gaps by offering specific 'propositions' constitutive for the formation of internally coherent cognitive representations derived from incomplete narration.

To bring this analysis to a final point, Caracciolo theorizes the narrative gaps are not to be understood in terms of stylistic weaknesses but as deliberate stylistic choices textually that are embedded in discourse time to create readers' reactions such as suspense, expectation, and, in addition, dramatic intensity. In particular, through focusing on 'silent omissions,' he argues how narratives intentionally manipulate the availability of information, stimulating readers to reconstruct their perception of events when the omitted details become known. Building on this argument, to trace how readers make sense of these gaps, he aligns with Palmer's concept of the 'continuing-consciousness frame', which shows how a reader's mentality presupposes coherence in a character's mental or emotional world. Consequently, this viewpoint frames narrative gaps as cognitive and aesthetic strategies that demand the reader's cognitive engagement. To ground Caracciolo's theoretical perspectives, attention turns to an excerpt from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

**'Boo was sitting in the living room cutting some items from The Maycomb Tribune to paste in his scrapbook. As his father passed by, Boo drove the scissors into his parent's leg, pulled them out, wiped them on his pants, and resumed his activities'** Lee [36, p. 9].

Although the narrative presents the events without complexity, it leaves major gaps in Boo's inner world. The first can be characterized as *motivational*. Specifically, motivational gaps occur when a character's motives are left to the reader's inference. In this case, the text compels readers to infer potential motives from background knowledge and contextual cues, demonstrating a cognitive

interpretive process (see e.g. [37]; [36]). Consequently, the narrative leaves Boo's conduct unexplained: what is the reason behind his actions? Can it be interpreted as unprovoked violence? Should it be construed as a reaction to an insult or an act of obedience? Was it a sudden action without prior thought? Furthermore, the discourse time shifts unexpectedly from an ordinary activity (scrapbooking) to sudden violence, leaving Boo's inner world opaque to the reader. Thus, motivational gaps are cognitive, as they compel readers to reconstruct the cause behind a character's actions.

Second, from a cognitive perspective, the emotional dimension remains opaque. Emotional gaps, in general, occur when the character's emotional state remains vague or minimally described. Accordingly, readers cognitively reshape emotions through narrative signals and prior knowledge (see e.g. [38]; [39]). For instance, what emotions shaped Boo's consciousness at that moment: panic, calm detachment, or fear? The narrative conveys the act with chilling simplicity through the use of verbs such as 'drove,' 'pulled out,' 'wiped,' and 'resumed.' As a result, the absence of emotional cues forces readers to reconstruct his inner feelings. Therefore, since readers are required to infer the missing emotional content, emotional gaps are considered part of cognitive maps.

Third, the narrative leaves a contextual gap that readers must infer. Contextual gaps often arise from the exclusion of relevant cultural, situational, or historical knowledge; bridging such gaps requires the use of cognitive schemata and contextual signals (see e.g. [40]; [41]).

In the narrative, this event is presented as part of local folklore, as narrated by Miss Stephanie Crawford, not through direct experience. Here, the gap arises in terms of reliability: Is the narrative faithful to what actually happened? Or does the narrative reflect rumor rather than reality? Ultimately, these gaps are cognitive in nature because readers must reconstruct situational frames from fragmentary textual cues.

Developing this analysis further, this

discussion reveals the points of convergence between stylistics and the three narrative gaps that have been discussed: motivational, emotional, and contextual. First, the lexical choice of verbs, 'drove,' 'pulled out,' 'wiped,' and 'resumed', is confined to physical description. In this way, such a style resembles that of a police statement or medical report rather than a psychological narrative. As a result, this clinical stylistic choice creates an emotional gap. Moreover, such use of verbs forces the reader to supply the emotional stance, thereby engaging cognitively with the question: which emotions motivated him to act this way? Second, syntactically, the expression 'Boo drove the scissors into his parents' leg, pulled them out, wiped them on his pants, and resumed his activities', is structured paratactically, which in turn creates a motivational gap (why a character does something). The lack of subordinating causal structure, '*because* he was angry, he drove...' in two paratactic structures, 'drove the scissors into his parent's leg', expressing violent action, and 'wiped them on his pants', as a mundane action, causes the reader's cognitive faculties to be activated to infer causality.

Furthermore, focalization as a stylistic technique constitutes a key source of narrative gaps. The excerpt is externally focalized, presenting only Boo's observable actions, such as 'cutting some items from The Maycomb Tribune' and driving 'the scissors into his parents' leg,' without narrating his inner consciousness. Moreover, in addition to focalization, the excerpt shows the significance of transitivity as a crucial stylistic feature influencing reader perception. In transitivity analysis, Boo is the actor, his father's leg is the goal, and the verb of violence 'drove' functions as a process. Without any external trigger, the pattern, **actor, process, and goal frame the scene as an unambiguous act of violence initiated by Boo**. A process as such is the surface realization of narrative gaps. Thus, there is an encouragement for readers to reshape the interpretive procedures resulting from contextually embedded markers, pragmatically inferred motives, and mitigations arising from contextual factors. The

foregoing analysis demonstrates that Harper's stylistic choices are intentional and act as the mechanisms that bring Caracciolo's cognitive theoretical perspectives into narrative practice.

### Conclusion

The present paper is an attempt to trace the counterargument, related to narrative gaps, that these gaps, as textual representations, are not only ellipses. They stand as critical stylistic choices that cognitively inspire readers to have a broad understanding of narrative complexity. Following different theoretical perspectives, ranging from Kermode's temporal gaps to Caracciolo's cognitive approaches, this study contributes to the understanding that narrative gaps, whether they are temporal, negative, blank, overcoding, or saturation, function as intentional narrative techniques. Therefore, gaps as such inspire readers to be active meaning-makers. They lead readers to draw implications and contribute to the production of textual significance. This mechanism of reading shifts reading from a non-productive process into active negotiation between readers and texts. From another perspective, in order to examine the ambiguity of multiple dimensions of meaning, the research analysis has demonstrated that narrative gaps are structurally encoded through various linguistic techniques. Such techniques include narrative turns in capitalization or formatting, context-sensitive semantic relations, clause structures, and focalization practices. Besides, the active narrative relationship between what is explicitly narrated and what is implicitly encoded (gaps) is a real representation of two narrative frames in story worlds: opaqueness and transparency. It is also important to note that this paper not only matches theoretical narrative perspectives with semiotic realizations within the text but also directs attention to the extent to which narrative gaps can reshape readers' cognitive and aesthetic perceptions. For this reason, this analysis offers a new conceptualization of narrative gaps, not as a passive communicative mechanism; rather, it is an essential and critical mechanism that functions in

characterizing the active interaction between readers' cognition and narrative structure.

### References

1. Mackenzie, Catriona. "Embodied Agents, Narrative Selves." *Philosophical Explorations*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2014, pp. 154-71.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13869795.2014.886363>.
2. Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press, 1978.
3. Menary, Richard. "Embodied Narratives." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2008, pp. 63-84.
4. Prince, Gerald. *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*. Mouton Publishers, 1982.
5. Iser, Wolfgang. *The Range of Interpretation*. Columbia University Press, 2000.
6. Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
7. Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cornell University Press, 1980.
8. Hardy, Donald E. "Towards a Stylistic Typology of Narrative Gaps: Knowledge Gapping in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction." *Language and Literature*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2005, pp. 363–75.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947005056343>.
9. Leitch, Thomas. "Mind the Gaps." *Adaptation in Visual Culture*, edited by Julie Grossman and R. Barton Palmer,

- Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 53-71. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58580-2\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58580-2_4).
10. Holland, Norman N. *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. 1st ed., Oxford University Press, 1968.
  11. Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.
  12. Bleich, David. *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1975.
  13. Rosenblatt, Louise M. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.
  14. Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Harvard University Press, 1980.
  15. Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated by Timothy Bahti, University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
  16. Gerrig, Richard J. "Readers' Experiences of Narrative Gaps." *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, pp. 19-37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/STW.0.0007>.
  17. Shen, Dan. "Stylistics and Narratology." *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics*, edited by Michael Burke, Routledge, 2014, pp. 191-205.
  18. Wales, Katie. *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. 2nd ed., Pearson Education Limited, 2001.
  19. Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, Elzbieta. "The Figures of Suppression: Gappiness of Language and Text-Worlds and Its Reflection in Style." *Continuity in Language: Styles and Registers in Literary and Non-Literary Discourse*, edited by Ewa Willim, AFM Publishing House, 2014, pp. 107-24.
  20. Armstrong, Paul B. *How Literature Plays with the Brain: The Neuroscience of Reading and Art*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.
  21. Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
  22. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books, 1987.
  23. Leech, Geoffrey, and Mick Short. *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. 2nd ed., Pearson Education Limited, 2007.
  24. Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, edited and translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, 1917, University of Nebraska Press, 1965, pp. 3-24.
  25. Sweller, John. "Cognitive Load Theory." *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation: Cognition in Education*, edited by Jose P. Mestre and Brian H. Ross, Academic Press, 2011, pp. 37-76.
  26. Fluck, Winfried. "The Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser's Literary Theory." *New Literary History*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2000, pp. 175-210. *JSTOR*,

- www.jstor.org/stable/20057593.
27. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated by Jessie Coulson, Oxford University Press, 1981.
  28. Eco, Umberto. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Indiana University Press, 1979.
  29. Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, 1976.
  30. Márquez, García Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1967.
  31. Doležel, Lubomír. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
  32. Rooney, Sally. *Normal People*. Crown Publishing Group, 2019.
  33. Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. Vintage Books, 1995.
  34. Caracciolo, Marco. *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach*. De Gruyter, 2014. *Narratologia*, vol. 43, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110365658>.
  35. Palmer, Alan. *Fictional Minds*. University of Nebraska Press, 2004.
  36. Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Dramatic Publishing Company, 1970.
  37. Heider, Fritz. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1958.
  38. Zunshine, Lisa. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Ohio State University Press, 2006.
  39. Hogan, Patrick Colm. *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
  40. Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2002.
  41. Herman, David. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. University of Nebraska Press, 2002.